

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 262

Tuesday 27 April 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 535 - 624

Witness

I: Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of Witness

Witness: Michelle Donelan MP.

Q535 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Welcome to our session with the Minister for Universities. Please introduce yourself for the benefit of those watching on the internet and Parliament TV.

Michelle Donelan: Thank you very much, Chair. My name is Michelle Donelan. I am the Minister for Universities.

Q536 **Chair:** How can you make it as unbureaucratic and as simple as possible for students who do not feel that they have had quality higher education over the past year, and who are taking out huge loans, to make sure they get some kind of compensation?

Michelle Donelan: It really has been a very difficult and challenging year for higher education students. I have said on record that I think young people have particularly borne the brunt of this lockdown, and we still have a number of students who are not back studying with face-to-face learning. At the same time, university staff and support teams have worked their socks off and worked tirelessly throughout the last year to be able to continue educating our young people so that they have not had to take a break from education or put their lives on hold. We have seen some innovative and fantastic examples. That is one of the reasons why there is not a blanket refund across the board.

However, there is a process in place to assist the students you point out who feel that they have not had what the Government have laid out as our expectation: the quantity, the quality and the accessibility of tuition. If that is the position for a student, they should, first of all, make a formal complaint to their university and, if still unresolved, go to the OIA, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. That needs to be done so that it can be looked at case by case. The other thing they can do, or their parents can do, is a notification on the Office for Students website, which can trigger a review where the Office for Students can have a look at whether the quality of provision is being maintained.

Q537 **Chair:** How easy is it with that process to make sure that the students get some kind of refund or compensation of some kind, so that they perhaps pay less the following year or whatever it may be?

Michelle Donelan: I can't guarantee that if a student goes through that process it will lead to a refund. It has the potential to do so. A few weeks ago the OIA published about 20 case studies, one of which was a refund up to the value of £5,000. That will depend on the individual contract that the student signed, the mitigations that the university has undergone to assist that student, given the context of where we are, and what that student has got.

Q538 **Chair:** Is information easily available for students on the Government website for them to be able to know how to make a complaint?



Michelle Donelan: Yes, certainly. We do a frequently asked questions document for students. I do a lot of student-facing comms and open letters to students where that is stressed. It is also all available on the Office for Students website, and the onus is not heavy on the students in the bureaucracy—going back to your first point—if they enter into that process. In fact, a lot of the information is sought from the university rather than the student, and they can do it online.

Q539 **Chair:** I want to move on to opportunity areas. I thank you and your officials for taking the time to show me, virtually, the Hastings and North Yorkshire opportunity areas last week and the work that the Department has put into the £90 million. But we know that, with funding due to end in August, the future of opportunity areas is up for consideration. What do you see as the future of this programme? Do you want opportunity areas to continue, to be lengthened or expanded to other areas?

Michelle Donelan: We will be making an announcement shortly on the future of opportunity areas. I am not in a position to pre-empt that announcement today, unfortunately. Since coming into the role I have always prioritised the twinning aspect and the sharing of knowledge of opportunity areas. We have seen some fantastic work done by opportunity areas, and it is important that we spread that across England as far as we possibly can. We are also about to publish a series of insight documents showing the evidence-based work that can be replicated in other areas.

Q540 **Chair:** Can you give us a hint of the future of opportunity areas? What is the direction of travel?

Michelle Donelan: I can't give you a hint, because that would be making the announcement today, but I can say that we will be making an announcement about the future of opportunity areas shortly and setting out the information. However, opportunity areas themselves have clarity about the direction of travel, so there are no concerns about them not knowing what is happening.

Q541 **Chair:** When will this announcement be made? Before the summer?

Michelle Donelan: Shortly. Yes, before the summer.

Q542 **Chair:** Before the summer, okay. So after the Queen's speech?

Michelle Donelan: I am not going to set a specific timeframe today, but I can tell you that it is shortly forthcoming.

Q543 **Chair:** As I understand it, the initial exercise undertaken to decide opportunity areas identified 32 candidates. The final 12 were selected not only on a basis of relative deprivation but also to ensure geographical spread of areas. This has meant that Waveney in Suffolk, to take an example, has missed out despite the fact it has the worst rating of 318 on the Social Mobility Index, and Stoke-on-Trent, an area selected for the programme, was rated at 298. To be clear to Jonathan, I am very happy



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that Stoke-on-Trent became an opportunity area. I am talking about areas that did not. There are clearly extremely deprived areas that are not receiving the support they need. What is the value in drawing such arbitrary lines in the sand, and how can we justify a winner-takes-all approach instead of dividing the cake more fairly among the most desperately disadvantaged areas in the country?

Michelle Donelan: Opportunity areas are areas that historically have significant challenges, and a number of them still do today, hence why we currently support them, but we know that place-based policy also works. One of my priorities, as I said a moment ago, is expanding that out so that it is not just confined to the 12 opportunity areas. We have done that with the twinning programme, which started with £1 million of funding. We have seen utilisation of community groups, like football clubs; Stoke has assisted with that, as one example. We are producing insight documents to get the best practice out there.

A lot of the work that we have been doing in opportunity areas is making those changes sustainable in the long term so that potentially you might be able to move on to different areas. There will always be areas across the country that have deprivation. If you are picking a few, you can never pick all of them, and we recognise that. That is why we want to get the best practice and evidence-based policy out there. We are working with other—

Q544 **Chair:** But you picked areas with much less deprivation than others. Surely you should have focused on the areas with the worst deprivation.

Michelle Donelan: It is also about the current infrastructure that is in there and the ability for that area to seek the change that it needs without us bringing the partnerships together. One of the beauties of opportunity areas and the way it works so successfully is that it brings a load of stakeholders together. It is not about creating more bureaucracy, but it is about giving a real focus and a drive. Some of the areas that have deprivation may already have some of those structures in existence and may need the support to a lesser extent, but we keep this all under review.

Q545 **Chair:** The reason for my question is that I worry they suck the funds out of other pots for disadvantaged pupils. An official evaluation progress report on opportunity areas in 2018 said that, "In addition to £72 million DfE core funding for the OA programme, OAs were offered priority access to a range of DfE initiatives", including the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, the Strategic School Improvement Fund, the essential life skills programme, maths hubs, the Careers and Enterprise Company, the National Citizen Service, the national collaborative outreach programme, to name but a few. Those areas with high levels of deprivation in particular that did not quite make the cut for the list for geographical reasons also risk being crowded out of other funding opportunities, and it is a double whammy of unintended consequences. To what extent does the Department have a steer on this potential



HOUSE OF COMMONS

consequence, and does it have systems in place to track this and make sure it is not happening?

Michelle Donelan: This Government were elected on a manifesto to level up, and some of the areas you referenced that did not make the cut, in your language, for opportunity areas certainly will be getting investment and other initiatives dedicated to them, not just from the Department for Education but from other Government Departments. This is very much at the heart of the Government's work in ensuring that we level up across the board. We keep under constant review those that are in the opportunity area bracket, as well as other schemes, and your point—

Q546 **Chair:** By nature, because they have privileged access to all the other Government schemes that are there to help with problems of schools and teaching or whatever it may be in disadvantaged areas, they are sucking a lot of the funds away from other parts of the country. Not only have you put opportunity areas in not the worst deprived areas but you have also allowed them to have privileged access to all the other schemes that go on elsewhere. That means fewer funds all round because these other projects are not getting more funds.

Michelle Donelan: The other areas will be getting other funds because that is part of our levelling-up agenda, and we are working with other Government Departments to assist in that. It is not about saying that we need to take it away from the opportunity areas, in my mind. It is about saying what more we can give to other areas that are equally if not more deprived.

Q547 **Chair:** In response to my written question in December 2020, the DfE said that, "Progress on every single project, across all 12 areas, is assessed on a monthly basis." The response further stated, "the programme is subject to a detailed, formal evaluation process. Given the entrenched nature of some educational attainment issues, progress on any given measure is always likely to take time and be incremental." The programme will be independently evaluated by the National Centre for Social Research, but you have confirmed that, due to the pandemic, the publication of this evaluation has been delayed until spring 2022. So how incremental? We are potentially in the worst possible scenario in that we have spent all the money but we do not know the outcomes. The previous official evaluation progress report in 2018 said, "It was felt that the task of measuring the impacts of the programme would need to extend over five to 15 years in order to capture the longer-term effect of their work on social mobility." We do not really know whether these opportunity areas have been effective.

Michelle Donelan: Well, we do know. We know that nine out of 12 have seen improvement in early years attainment, 10 out of 12 have seen key stage 2 combined attainment scores go up and 10 out of 12 have seen improvements in phonics results over that year. We do know and we are keeping that under constant review. The evaluation you are talking about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is a real deep-dive evaluation. When you look at some of these areas, which are some of the most deprived in the country with systemic issues, you are not going to see dramatic changes overnight. Some of this takes time.

That said, some of the evidence-based policy that we have been doing has been working and is effective, and we are now planning to potentially replicate some of that across the country. The Bradford opportunity area, for instance, introduced a scheme called “glasses for classes” and they found that 2,500 children did not have the right glasses or did not have glasses at all when they needed them, which was impacting their studies. That is something we have been working on with the Department of Health, and it could be replicated elsewhere. You saw on the visit last week the work we are doing on alternative provision and ensuring that students do not have to be excluded, and that has been successful as well. These are life-changing transformations for some young individuals.

Q548 Chair: In our Committee’s previous session on opportunity areas in 2019, it became apparent that opportunity areas are semi-obsessed with what I call “convene-itis”, that is with convening. Chris Starkie told us that the OAs in the east of England have had three conferences bringing opportunity areas together; Graham Cowley said that the value of the £6 million investment into Blackpool has been its convening power. We have loads of other examples where it was thought that the key purpose of opportunity areas was about convening. Is there a risk that too much money is going into convening people and chasing vague goals, and not enough on frontline delivery and specific outcomes? Surely there might be a more cost-effective way of encouraging more integrated effect between relevant agencies at local level. The improvements you identified have not necessarily happened because of the opportunity areas. They could have happened through investing that money in teacher recruitment, leadership or some of the other projects the Government are doing around the country.

Michelle Donelan: Teacher recruitment is one of the key themes of opportunity areas, and we have had excellent results in that respect, especially in areas on the Yorkshire coast.

Q549 Chair: If the main purpose of opportunity areas is to convene people together, it is basically a conference organisation, a brokerage service.

Michelle Donelan: I would not say it is one of the main purposes. One of the key advantages of an opportunity area is that it brings together all of the relevant stakeholders so that they work together and they have a key focus. All their policies revolve around the aims of the opportunity areas and we have seen that that has worked, it has brought people together, and we know that historically that has not been possible in those areas. We then introduced the opportunity areas and it has been possible. I see that as an advantage and something that can be sustainable in the long term once the money is eventually withdrawn from the Government. That is an advantage. However, it is not another



layer of bureaucracy. It is not a layer of cost because the chairs and the boards are not paid, they are volunteers.

Q550 Dr Caroline Johnson: Thank you, Minister, for coming today. I want to ask about the opportunity areas and some of the concerns that the Chairman has raised about how they target money in specific areas at the expense of others. We know that deprivation can be quite densely located in cities, but in rural areas, in rural constituencies such as mine, you get some children who are living in very deprived situations almost next door to children living in very much more affluent homes, so it is much more difficult to target. How are you making sure, as a Department, that these children are not left behind because they are harder to reach?

Michelle Donelan: I see that in my own constituency as well, that it is quite rural in nature but also has pockets of severe deprivations. That is why it is important that opportunity areas have not only created but tested evidence-based policy that we can look to roll out to other areas. We are producing insight documents, doing a substantial twinning programme, which we will look to build upon, to get the evidence-based policy out to other areas. But opportunity areas are only one aspect of the work of the Government and the Department for Education to lift up standards and enhance outcomes for young people. I would not want to detract from all the other work that my colleague, the Minister for School Standards, is doing on ensuring that young people can leave the education system with results that can unlock the next stages of their lives.

Q551 Dr Caroline Johnson: Are you saying, Minister, that the opportunity areas are essentially a testbed to see if ideas work, so you can then roll them out to make a universal service? For example, your “glasses for classes” idea sounds great. Is it planned to roll that out so it is available to children in rural areas, too?

Michelle Donelan: We are exploring that option. I think it is both. It is about lifting up the areas they are focusing on. These are place-based initiatives, and the policies in every single opportunity area are different because they are targeted to its particular needs and demographics. Then, of course, it is important that the Government flag up those that work and prove effective, that we promote them and look at the potential for rolling them out in other areas.

Q552 David Johnston: I have a quick question, Michelle. I had some experience when the original opportunity areas were being set up, because I was working in the charity sector, and a lot of charities from London flooded those areas, in the way that they do in Tower Hamlets. There is a lot of activity happening, so everybody started saying they wanted to work in those areas. Part of that might be good because you are getting some expertise from other parts of the country, but I always felt that the local knowledge in those areas from smaller organisations that had worked there for a longer time was possibly being missed by larger charities piling in. Have you given any thought to how you can



perhaps strike a better balance between people who will move there when they know there is money and people who have been there for a number of years and might be better qualified to help?

Michelle Donelan: My experience of the opportunity areas, having met the chairs multiple times on a number of virtual visits and, I think, the odd in-person visit—it is quite hard to remember with the pandemic—is very much that they are local-led and that these are the organisations and individuals who are passionate about their area and want to drive improvement in it. That said, there are a number of campaigns to bring people into the area, especially teachers, to the point that the Chair made about recruitment. Sometimes external organisations or charities can bring fresh ideas, but I believe they are still very much local-led. I agree with you that it is about getting a balance there.

Q553 **Chair:** I am going to switch subjects for a couple of minutes, Michelle. Jewish groups have alleged that the University of Bristol has provided an academic with a platform to promote conspiracy theories about Jewish influence and control using classic anti-Semitic tropes to characterise the state of Israel. It seems pretty appalling—and I have written to Bristol University about this—that Bristol University cares nothing for the welfare of its Jewish students and is making it a hostile environment for Jewish students. I think the behaviour of the management and the vice-chancellor of Bristol University is pretty appalling, given what this academic has said, and I am happy to quote that. Can you provide an update on any discussions with the University of Bristol and the Office for Students about the conduct of Professor David Miller?

Michelle Donelan: On anti-Semitism, it is absolutely—

Chair: On my specific question. I am going to come to anti-Semitism in general in a minute.

Michelle Donelan: Anti-Semitism in universities is abhorrent, and we have been working to encourage as many as possible to sign the IHRA definition, which Bristol already has done. This highlights the fact that it is not a panacea in addressing this issue. The Government do not comment on specific cases. There is an investigation going on in Bristol, and I believe it is still live. I urge Bristol University to ensure that is as thorough as possible, because some of the reports that have come out are extremely concerning. I urge them to focus particularly on the wording and the language that David Miller is alleged to have used about current students. You are quite right, universities need to be welcoming institutions for everybody from all walks of life and—

Q554 **Chair:** Jewish students have not felt that their university in Bristol has acted properly with regard to the allegations, which date back over several years. In these cases, what external bodies are available to assist students in ensuring complaints are handled correctly? I worry about your previous answer because, yes, I accept that you cannot get involved in every individual case, but you cannot just wash your hands when a major



university like Bristol University, a Russell Group university, is a hostile environment for Jewish students who have demonstrated and have been incredibly upset that there was a huge anti-Semitic controversy. The Government cannot just wash their hands and say, "No, we can't get involved in this." Surely this should be a significant priority for you as Minister for Universities, if not for the Secretary of State.

Michelle Donelan: I would hate anybody who is listening to think that the Government have washed their hands of anything to do with anti-Semitism, because that is absolutely not the case. However, it is my understanding that there is a live investigation going on at Bristol University, so we need that to carry on and conclude. We will then look at its findings. I know the Office for Students is also eagerly awaiting those findings. The Secretary of State sent a letter to the OfS earlier this year, and he asked it to do a scoping exercise on those who have signed up to the IHRA definition, but also to consider formally mandating universities to publish instances of anti-Semitism, which would include instances like this one. This is certainly an area of focus for this Government. They are deeply concerned, but while there is a live investigation—

Q555 **Chair:** In February 2019 this academic, David Miller, gave a lecture on the harms of the powerful, described by Jewish students as reminiscent of anti-Semitic language, tropes and conspiracy theories. Apparently, one slide of his presentation allegedly depicted a complex web of Jewish community organisations, charities and philanthropists under the heading "Israeli Government," with Miller allegedly claiming that parts of the Zionist movement were knowingly fostering Islamophobia. Why is that not unacceptable? Why would you not intervene to deal with this and tell the Bristol vice-chancellor that enough is enough and that we are not living in 1930s Germany and that they should deal with this problem and make sure that Bristol University is not a hostile environment to Jewish students?

Michelle Donelan: Universities in this country are autonomous. It is important that the university does this investigation and assesses what was said that was lawful and what was said that was not lawful. There is a higher education regulator, which is the Office for Students. I will await that report. I completely agree with you, anti-Semitism has no place in our universities, and I find it completely abhorrent. We have even given money to the Union of Jewish Students to assist with ensuring that campuses can be a safe—

Q556 **Chair:** Have you discussed this issue with the vice-chancellor of Bristol University?

Michelle Donelan: I am awaiting the conclusions of the review, after which I will indeed speak to the vice-chancellor.

Q557 **Chair:** To understand, how do you and the Government intend to give confidence to Jewish students that anti-Semitism is taken seriously in the wake of high-profile instances of anti-Semitism? There are others on



other campuses, but this is a particularly high-profile one and pretty shocking and disappointing. How do you intend to give confidence to Jewish students that this is not acceptable and that the Government will take action?

Michelle Donelan: We have been doing a number of things in this space. We have been encouraging universities to sign up to the IHRA definition. We now have 98, and others are considering that. As I said before, the Secretary of State wrote to the OfS in February and asked it to do a scoping exercise of those that have or have not signed up and to look at asking universities to publicise incidents so that it is much more transparent. Young people who are looking to go to university will have a clearer picture of what universities represent in terms of tolerance and so on. In addition, as I said, we have also given money to the Union of Jewish Students to ensure that we can encourage a much more supportive environment. I meet with a number of representatives in this area, and I agree with you that more work needs to be done, but on this specific example we will wait for the review and see exactly what it concludes.

Q558 **Chair:** Will you then have conversations with the senior management of Bristol University?

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely, yes.

Q559 **Christian Wakeford:** Following on from the Chair about Bristol University, the Community Security Trust produced a report on campus anti-Semitism. There were several recommendations from that report. If you have read the report, do you agree with those recommendations?

Michelle Donelan: The report said that the majority of Jewish students have had a positive experience, which is good news. However, the extremely disappointing and concerning things that came out of the report were the rise in the number of incidents that they reported. That is deeply concerning, and the Government want universities to be tolerant and welcoming places for students of all walks of life. One of the recommendations of that report was to encourage universities to sign up to the IHRA definition, which is the work that the Government have been doing as well. I will continue to urge all universities to sign up to that definition. That said, it is not a panacea. As we have seen, there are universities like Bristol that have incidents and are signed up to that definition.

Q560 **Christian Wakeford:** Going back to Bristol University, some of these complaints have been going on for over three years now. One of the recommendations from the CST report was to improve the complaints procedures. Would you agree that the complaints procedures at Bristol University over that three-year period have failed Jewish students?

Michelle Donelan: They all have a responsibility to have effective, transparent complaints processes, and that is part of consumer



HOUSE OF COMMONS

regulations as well, because students are consumers. I certainly will continue to pick this up with the Office for Students.

Q561 Christian Wakeford: We have moved a long way from where we were at this point last year to where we are now, with a large number of universities having adopted the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. What is the Department, and you as Minister, doing with those universities that are actively opposed to adopting the IHRA definition, such as Oxford Brookes and Derby? With the universities that have adopted IHRA, how are we making sure that it is not just a tick-box exercise, that they say they have done it? How do we make sure that they are enforcing the IHRA definition?

Michelle Donelan: That is a very good point, because it needs to be part of the ethos of the university. To your first point, we will continue to urge all universities to sign up to this. We have written several letters, and I am pushing and promoting this in a number of my meetings. I will continue to meet those who have concerns or are directly opposed to the definition, to try to understand their perspective so that I can reassure them and work with them to encourage them to sign up. Enforcing it is part and parcel of why the Secretary of State wrote to the OfS about looking at whether we should potentially be mandating universities to publish incidents that happen, which would then highlight whether the definition is having an impact on the ground.

Q562 Kim Johnson: Good morning, Michelle. As you know, there has been a significant increase in race hate crime, particularly since the 2016 referendum. How do you believe that universities support students experiencing anti-black racism and Islamophobia? Are these instances monitored and reviewed? What support and funding is available to these students? Would you agree that there is no place for any form of racism in any of our universities?

Michelle Donelan: There is absolutely no place for any form of racism in our universities. That is not just me speaking; it is the Government's perspective as well. Any reports of such behaviour are not only deeply concerning but threaten the reputation and the future of our universities across the UK. Recently, the Office for Students produced a statement of expectations—I believe it was last week—and this is basically about the standard to which we expect our universities to adhere for not only sexual harassment but also racism and discrimination. It is about the work that universities should be doing to prevent that but also how they should deal with it if those things arise. The OfS is very much setting the bar and the expectation, and it is monitoring this closely. We continue to work with the OfS to see what more we need to do in this space to protect students and enable them to feel safe and welcomed in a tolerant environment while they are learning.

Q563 Kim Johnson: Two of my questions were not answered. How are these incidents monitored and reviewed? And what funding is available to students experiencing anti-black racism and Islamophobia.



Michelle Donelan: The Office for Students is the body that regulates and monitors such behaviour. On funding, universities have access and participation money and various sources of funding, their main source of funding being tuition fees. The Government do not give a specific fund, if that is the question, to universities to address issues of racism, because we expect that would be at the very heart of what a university is doing. Any university should be ensuring that at the very heart of its ethos is tolerance, respect, encouraging an environment in which people can learn and flourish, and that this sort of—

Q564 **Chair:** All the stuff you are saying is just words. If you cannot intervene—say it is an individual case at Bristol University and you cannot intervene—then it is just words. Bristol University has broken the IHRA modern definition. There have been some awful things going on for Jewish students. They feel unsafe and unprotected and that the university is now a hotbed of anti-Semitism, yet all the Government can do is say, “We will wait for a review,” and not intervene. Surely you should look at things like funding, or at least meet the vice-chancellor early on and say, “What on earth is going on here? Why do thousands of Jewish students feel that Bristol University is not a safe place for Jews?”

Michelle Donelan: I think it is important to remember, though, that the university sector is autonomous in this country. We have a regulator, which is the Office for Students, so there is a different dynamic from that which we have in our—

Q565 **Chair:** There is nothing to stop you picking up the phone to the vice-chancellor and saying, “What on earth is going on? Get your act together. Do something to protect these students. It is your duty to protect them,” rather than washing your hands of it and saying they are autonomous.

Michelle Donelan: I am not washing my hands of it at all, and I have made that very clear throughout this. I am awaiting that review to be concluded. This is an individual case. The Government do not normally intervene with individual cases because universities are autonomous. They need to produce the individual reviews. Once that review is done, absolutely I will examine it and speak to the vice-chancellor once I have the facts in front of me about what has happened, rather than just relying on the media reports up to now.

Q566 **Jonathan Gullis:** I am very disturbed, if I have heard Christian correctly, that Oxford Brookes is refusing to sign up to the IHRA definition. I am a graduate of Oxford Brookes, and it should be ashamed and embarrassed about itself, quite frankly, if it refuses to sign up to it.

Minister, I must say that this issue is carrying on. For example, Dr Goldie Osuri at Warwick University said that anti-Semitism in the Labour party was an “Israeli lobby” kind of idea. An investigation was overseen by Professor Virinder Kalra, who had already expressed public opposition to the IHRA, and Stuart Croft, the vice-chancellor, was the biggest embarrassment to students at his university. We need to go further than



HOUSE OF COMMONS

just finding them, we need to start sacking people. Stuart Croft, Dr Goldie Osuri and Professor Virinder Kalra need to go, to be quite frank. Until we start bringing that kind of scrutiny and action into our university sector, like you would do if you were in a primary or secondary school, these incidents will keep happening. What can you say to that?

Michelle Donelan: We can't sack professors or people like that because we are not their employer. This is the difference with the university sector. It is autonomous and we have not hired them. The IHRA definition is not a legal requirement. However, we will continue to encourage it and work with the OfS to see what more we can do. That was at the heart of the Secretary of State's letter earlier this year. I agree with you, certain universities do need to go further in this area and it is deeply concerning that Jewish students feel put off from applying to certain universities. That is not modern Britain, and that is not the country that we all want to live in.

Q567 **Chair:** Have you met the Union of Jewish Students to discuss Bristol University and these other areas?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, to discuss the topic of anti-Semitism in universities in general. I have not had a specific meeting on the incident in Bristol.

Jonathan Gullis: It is fair enough that universities are the employer, but rules need to be put in place so that these people can be got rid of. In my opinion, at the very least the head of the Office for Students should be able to remove vice-chancellors if they are not upholding the protection of students, particularly those who are Jewish, where we see time and time again that anti-Semitism is rife in the university sector. I think it is an absolute abomination in modern society that this is still going on.

Q568 **Chair:** It is not just the one university that I have highlighted. Jonathan has highlighted other universities and, as a Minister, you should make a positive statement that this is unacceptable. Michelle, it is not just media reports about Bristol University. There are pages and pages of documented evidence from various organisations about what has gone on at that university and it is a disgrace. Personally, I think the senior management should resign because they care nothing about anti-Semitism. They are hiding behind employment law. The way that Bristol University has treated its Jewish students is a disgrace in the 21st century. Students who go to Bristol University and other universities should not feel that they are living in 1930s Germany. I think it has become such a serious national issue, and it has been raised in Parliament a number of times, that you should take a proactive role and do what you can to speak to the senior management and tell them to get a grip and deal with this once and for all.

Michelle Donelan: I really want to stress that the Government and I think that anti-Semitism is abhorrent and unacceptable.

Q569 **Chair:** You should cut off funding. If these universities do not deal with it,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you should cut off any kind of funding for this kind of university. Why should Bristol University be getting funding when it is harbouring a known anti-Semite?

Michelle Donelan: We will keep all these things under review and work with the Office for Students. I await the conclusion of that review. The Government do not comment on individual cases, but I have gone as far as I possibly can on this today.

Chair: We will move on, thank you. Obviously, there are strong feelings from members of the Committee on these subjects.

Q570 **Ian Mearns:** Michelle, there was not an opportunity area covering any part of the north-east of England, where levels of deprivation would have easily qualified many places to be included. The north-east subsequently was awarded an opportunity fund, but it is separate from the opportunity areas. Are you reviewing the work of the opportunity fund and, if you are, how is it going?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, we have Opportunity North East—ONE as it is known—with £24 million dedicated to that, particularly to assist with progression at secondary school and beyond and lifting up standards. That work is ongoing. We are keeping everything under review, of course. We will keep you updated on that as we update about the rest of the opportunity areas.

Q571 **Ian Mearns:** Rob often mentions that I do not talk about opportunity areas—I never mention them in this Committee—but many of us in the north-east of England thought it was really rather odd in the first place that there was not an opportunity area in the north-east of England, given the overall parameters and remit. Some constituencies are deprived with pockets of prosperity, and some are mainly prosperous with pockets of poverty, and there are many more of the former than the latter in the north-east of England.

On the return to universities, students are graduating into a challenging labour market, with almost one in eight recent graduates unemployed in the third quarter of last year. What conversations have you had with the sector about support for graduates as they try to get on the employment ladder? In particular—something that I am always kicking the door on—what is happening with careers advice and guidance in the sector?

Michelle Donelan: This is an area of focus. I know that, having spoken to a number of students, they are concerned about graduating into the current labour market. One of my key messages is that, despite the flexibility that professional accreditation bodies have shown, they will be graduating with high-quality degrees that can offer them the opportunity to unlock the next stage. From my conversations with businesses, they see this cohort of graduates as extremely resilient and offering a set of skills that others potentially might not have.

We are working with universities on a package that we will be announcing shortly, which will very much signpost graduates to the right places as



well as additional support and opportunities for them to add to their CVs and so on. Some of that stuff is already out there. We have the skills toolkit, which is an amazing resource that is free to use. That has a number of courses on it that can add value to CVs and make people more employable. We have also invested £32 million in the National Careers Service to help with careers. We have appointed 27,000 new work coaches.

Universities play a role here and they are working up, as they did last year, a number of initiatives to support students. Some are offering online courses that are free, some are offering career support for life, like the University of Chester, for instance, that I was speaking to the other day. This is about a partnership between universities and the Government to assist the cohort that will be graduating this year.

Q572 Ian Mearns: What timescale do you have for making sure all of that is in place? Are you going to have refined approaches depending on local job markets around the country? The job market is not one job market, and the position of unemployment for graduates is different in different parts of the country.

Michelle Donelan: It is, and that is why we have invested in 27,000 additional work coaches across the country who can assist on regional bases. Universities will know their own locality and be better placed to assist and to link up with local businesses. We will be ensuring that we are signposting graduates as much as we can in those local areas, engaging with local councils and utilising other business forums. I appreciate the concerns of graduates and, let's face it, these students have had a very difficult and challenging last year of university. I recognise the importance of assisting them.

Q573 Ian Mearns: Thank you, but I am interested in hearing what the roadmap and timescales for delivering all that looks like, please.

Michelle Donelan: We will be publishing that soon. One of the things that we should stress in this area, which will be to the main benefit of graduates, is the Government's focus on safeguarding jobs throughout the pandemic. A lot of the work that has been done—things like the coronavirus job retention scheme, the business grants, all of that stuff—was designed to safeguard jobs and to allow some companies potentially to grow in future. Graduates will benefit from that as well.

Q574 David Johnston: Michelle, in addition to the difficult labour market, for the jobs that there are, do you think there ought to be a form of, for want of a better phrase, contextual admission that recognises the fact that some university students have lost some of their teaching time, some of them have lost some of the placements they might have been doing in the year before they graduated, so they have not developed the business skills and the soft skills that might be needed? They may not have had the same content that they would have had in their courses. Do you think employers should be taking that into account when they make



their hiring decisions this year?

Michelle Donelan: My understanding is that they certainly will be. We have been working with businesses to promote that message, and not just businesses but also the professional accreditation bodies. For example, QAA did a statement on how this cohort will be on a par with any other year. It is important that we do not talk down those who are graduating this year, because they will still be graduating at an excellent, world-renowned quality. We are home to some of the world's best institutions. I would hate for any of our language to be talking down those who are graduating this year. They offer a fantastic set of skills, including resilience and other skills that they have developed over this very challenging year, which I believe employers will recognise when looking to recruit.

Q575 **Tom Hunt:** Good morning, Minister. I have a question about degree apprenticeships and skills. It seems to me that some universities seem to be driven primarily by, for want of a better term, bums on seats and, frankly, making money and not always skills development, particularly in the local area. What more work do you think the Government can do to create a framework of incentives to encourage and incentivise universities to do more when it comes to skills? What role do you see the skills improvement plans, as part of the White Paper, playing in making it so that our university sector comes more to the table with degree apprenticeships and skills? That is not to downplay some of the good work that is going on, but I think more could be done.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, certainly and, as you say, there has been a great deal of work done, including the IoTs, which involve universities and are very much skills focused. I think one of the main ways that we can address these issues is through the lifelong learning entitlement, which will come in in 2025, which is about making sure that our higher education and technical education is much more flexible in nature and universities can be part and parcel of that.

On degree apprenticeships, I gave a UCAS admissions speech quite recently, where I urged all universities basically to change path and really focus on increasing the volume of degree apprenticeships that they are offering. From speaking to students, they are crying out for more opportunities that are degree apprenticeships. In my constituency I see, time after time, parents dying for their student to go and do a degree apprenticeship, but the choice that is available is much more limited than conventional studies. I completely agree with you.

I held a roundtable with the Russell Group, with my colleague the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, a few months back where we were speaking to Russell Group members about how we could support them to put on more degree apprenticeships, to ensure that their entry requirements include T-levels, for instance. It is also about every tier of universities addressing this area.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tom Hunt: A few universities that I have spoken to over the last year or so have said—and I am not really an expert in this area—that it has been more difficult than they would have liked to engage in degree apprenticeships, and sometimes it has not been the most attractive option for them financially. That is one of the points that has been relayed to me by them. I am the messenger there, but I wanted to make sure that—

Chair: Depending on time, I may come back to degree apprenticeships. Michelle, having known you for many years, you are probably the most pro-skills higher education Minister we have had for many a year and I know you care passionately about this.

Q576 **Apsana Begum:** Thanks, Minister, for joining us this morning. My first question is on the fact that we have seen a 13.9% increase in the number of A* and A grades in the last year. For the second year in a row, we are likely to see significant A-level grade inflation. What discussions have you had with the sector about the consequences for the financial position of some institutions if higher-tariff universities, for example, expand recruitment at the expense of lower-tariff universities?

Michelle Donelan: On the whole grade inflation issue, in comparison to last year, I must stress that this is a very different scenario. Universities have been involved in the process of designing the alternative to exams from the off via their input into the consultation and our work with them. Yes, we want universities to be flexible in their approach to those who are gaining A-level qualifications this year, and they are certainly planning to do so, because of the challenges those students have faced. We will continue to work with universities to ensure that the whole sector is supported. Last year we had to introduce temporary student number caps to resolve the issue that you have identified, but this year we are not seeing the same patterns shaping up at the moment. We will continue to monitor that and work with the sector to ensure that the whole sector can be taken forward throughout this journey.

Q577 **Apsana Begum:** Pre-pandemic, some universities were already asking for loans and financial support from the Government. Are you not concerned? Are you saying absolutely no lower-tariff universities are likely to go bust or are in that risk zone?

Michelle Donelan: I work closely with the Office for Students to monitor the financial health of institutions. We did a stabilisation package last year, which included bringing forward £2 billion of funding. We have also worked with BEIS, which has assisted and given up to 80% of the value for international students, should that have materialised, but in fact the data shows that international students were up in the end. There was a report by the Office for Students last October that showed that, in aggregate, the university sector is financially quite healthy. At the moment we do not have any institution that is imminently about to go into financial liquidation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We also set up a safety net, the restructuring regime, where if an institution had explored all the support available, including utilising the job retention scheme, the loans available and all of that stuff, and was still in financial difficulties, they could enter into the restructuring regime and we could support them and utilise our team of experts to assist. Not one single university has taken up that opportunity, which I think speaks volumes. However, this is an evolving picture because we are still in a pandemic and I continue to monitor it.

Q578 Apsana Begum: From what you are saying, it is slightly different from what looks like the overall picture that universities are under significant amounts of pressure. You are saying that it is all okay, there are fluctuations and issues but it is not quite at the point where there are universities reaching financial insolvency or facing any sort of crisis.

Michelle Donelan: I didn't say it is okay. Universities, like every sector, faced challenges and continue to face challenges, and there is a degree of uncertainty. However, no university has joined the restructuring regime, which is the Government's safety net to support them. I work with the Office for Students and there is not one university at the moment that is facing financial bankruptcy as a result of Covid, but I will continue to work with them and to review the situation in real time.

Q579 Apsana Begum: Thank you. Moving on to my next question, the Office for Students has published a statement of expectations on sexual harassment, setting out policies and systems for universities to follow. Should this be a regulatory requirement tied to universities' registration conditions rather than just optional guidance, which is what it is currently?

Michelle Donelan: I met the Office for Students, with the Secretary of State, the other day and we were discussing how more needs to be done in this space. We are very much open to this, because it is an important area for us to drill down on. I am sure we are all deeply concerned by some of the reports that came out of the Everyone's Invited website and I am scheduled to meet the founder of that website to discuss the nature of some of those reports.

The sector has been doing some work in this space. In 2015 the Government commissioned UUK, the largest sector representative body, to form a taskforce on it. It produced the "Changing the culture" report and has been doing update documents. I believe it is going to publish another one this year, and I met them to discuss it. This is something that the Government are more than happy to explore if we need to go further in this space.

Q580 Apsana Begum: At this point you don't think there should be any penalties for non-compliance? It is optional guidance at the moment. If these expectations or conditions are not adhered to at registration, there would be no penalties, no consequences, at present. Are you okay with that?



Michelle Donelan: The Office for Students has published a statement of expectations that sets the bar for what universities are expected to meet. It is monitoring that, as are we. We are looking at whether we need to go further in this space with the OfS, and we will report back in due course.

Q581 **Apsana Begum:** I am not exactly clear as to the next steps. You say monitor and review, but it seems unspecific.

Michelle Donelan: We are considering working with the Office for Students on what more we can do and need to do to address this issue, and on whether we need to give the Office for Students, for instance, more power in this space. We are looking at that, but I am not in a position today to detail exactly what that could potentially look like.

Q582 **Fleur Anderson:** Thank you, Minister, for joining us today. I have four questions about different areas. The first one is about a post-qualifications admissions model and the potential move towards it. The consultations are ongoing and there is a difference of opinion on whether this will deliver on increasing the number of young people on free school meals who are accessing university. I met the Access Project yesterday, and it is one of the main deliverers of support for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to higher education. It was saying it looks on the surface as if a post-qualifications admissions system would help those young people, but in its experience it does not think it will because it is much quicker. It does not give young people the time they need to get their head around applying and going to university. There are differences of opinion.

What is your view on the post-qualifications admissions model and whether or not it will be implemented? Are you having conversations with UCAS, schools, colleges, universities and young people about what the impact of it would be and whether it would deliver what we want?

Michelle Donelan: You are quite right, there is a range of opinions on this. We are doing this in the first place because it was a manifesto commitment to improve and make fairer the applications system that young people enter into. The consultation closes on 13 May. I would encourage everybody to get involved with that, but we have not only been doing the consultation. I have been hosting a number of roundtables with different sector representative groups and with students themselves. At the heart of this are students. We want to make it fairer for them and remove some of the barriers that they face.

The consultation outlines two models. One is the PQA model and the other is normally known as the PQO model. However, we are not fixed on those models. We want to engage with people to make sure that we get this right, and we are enlisting them in the consultation. People may have ideas to tweak those models, or for a hybrid model, and we are very much open to that. We know that the current system has a number of things that disadvantage the disadvantaged or advantage the advantaged, including the over-reliance on predicted grades. Studies



HOUSE OF COMMONS

show that they are up to 80% inaccurate in over-predicting some students, and they also under-predict those who tend to be disadvantaged anyway. The current system allows for conditional or unconditional offers, which we know can pressurise students, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and then result in lower A-level results.

I think it is right that we consider this space. We are one of the only countries in the world that has a system like we have. If we were designing it today, we probably would not design it like this, but one of the things that we certainly want to make sure of is that any of the changes we make don't make it worse for disadvantaged students. That is why we are engaging in such a detailed and comprehensive consultation, and I urge everybody on the Select Committee to engage with that.

Q583 Fleur Anderson: My next question is about the return to in-person teaching and how the decisions were made. I have had a lot of very frustrated emails from students in my constituency and from my vice-chancellor, who said he had done absolutely everything to make sure the university was Covid safe, with very low numbers of cases, and he had seen throughout March and April all the other sectors opening up. As you said, Minister, last time you came to see us, SAGE gave advice about the detrimental impact of online learning on the mental and physical health of students, yet they are still not back until later next month when a lot of courses will actually be finished. It is hugely frustrating for so many students.

Why was the decision made not to open up at the same time as schools, especially for those universities that could prove they were safe and had testing regimes in place? Why has it been delayed for so long?

Chair: Just to add, why can students go to FE colleges but not to universities?

Michelle Donelan: We made a decision about defining it by the setting rather than the actual course. There are only about 100,000 students studying higher education at an FE college. The majority of those are commuter students, and the majority study practical subjects that were already back on 8 March anyway.

Commuter students are important for Fleur's question. One of the key reasons why we did not open it up in step 2 but linked it to step 3 is that, while the majority of students are back at university in accommodation, because they are accessing face to face, because they are exempted or because they have gone back, ONS still predicts that about 23% have not. We are talking about potentially up to 500,000 students, which would mean a mass movement of up to 500,000 students who would then form new households. When we look at step 2 of the roadmap, it is not about socialising in indoor settings, nor is it about the formation of new households. As you point out, SAGE consistently warned throughout



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the pandemic about the mass movement of students and the formation of new households.

That said, I am not taking away from how challenging and difficult it is for students or how many of them will be disappointed that they could not go back earlier to enjoy that face-to-face teaching, but it is important that we are cautious at every stage of the roadmap. It is designed to be irreversible. Anything with a slight risk could topple the whole thing over.

We also considered the wellbeing of students and the student experience they would be going into, and also the wellbeing of students who are already back. We know from before, when we managed to get back to practical and creative subjects, it was very concerning whether we would be able to graduate them on time. We will now, because we got them back on 8 March. However, if we had all the other students back and that had potentially resulted in a number of outbreaks and students self-isolating regularly, that might have threatened the graduation of some of those students.

We have to consider all these things in the round when we are making these decisions. We considered all the scientific advice and information from the likes of SAGE, the DCMO, the CMO, Public Health England, the JBC and SPI-M.

Q584 Fleur Anderson: The lateness of the guidance has been raised with me by the vice-chancellor of Roehampton, who wrote to me in April in absolute frustration, "Why do we have no guidance yet about when this will happen?" I know many students went back, and then it was announced that they would not be going in person until May, but they had already gone back. Most students had made that journey. They did what you are saying is the most risky part before the guidance was issued. Why were there delays with the guidance, throughout April especially?

Michelle Donelan: There were no delays. We always said that we would do a review over the Easter holidays, which is exactly what we did. What we wanted to do was give ourselves the maximum time to review all that information, to look at the scientific evidence and so on, and to make those considerations to try to get students back as early as we possibly could. We reviewed that over the Easter holidays, and then we announced what the position was and that the next stage of student returns would be in line with step 3 on 17 May, should we meet those data requirements.

Q585 Fleur Anderson: We talked about mental health last time you came to the Select Committee, and rightly so. I know mental health is a particular concern of yours, and of many students and staff. My own university, Roehampton, has seen a 20% increase in students accessing wellbeing and mental health advice, and I know it is the same across the country in even greater numbers. The University and College Union has been in touch about the mental health impact on staff and the results of staff



HOUSE OF COMMONS

surveys on the increase in stress, which we knew was there already.

My question is twofold. What is your assessment of the mental health impact on staff and students at the moment, and what action will you be taking to continue that mental health support for students into next year—because we know this will continue—through Student Space, for example? Will you be looking at the structural causes of staff stress, so the excessive workloads, the insecure employment and those issues that staff are bringing up that are causing mental health issues, which then have an impact on teaching and the institutions as well?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, this really does concern me, as it did before the pandemic, to be honest, especially in relation to student mental health. We know there are some studies out there already. I think the ONS showed that two thirds of students feel their mental health and wellbeing has deteriorated since the autumn term, and they have been through very challenging and uncertain times. As I said, SAGE warned about the mental health impacts of studying remotely and so on. It has been a focus, encouraging universities to transition their support services online from the off, and I have consistently made sure that I have reiterated the importance to universities of prioritising this area, both mental health and wellbeing.

You talked about Student Space, the £3 million fund we have worked on with the OfS, which has been extended for the whole of the academic year. We have also set up a mental health action group, which is co-chaired by me and the Minister responsible for children and is attended by the mental health ambassador, Dr Alex George, who the Prime Minister appointed. That is looking at not just mental health for students but also mental health for staff, and drilling down on some of the issues that you raised.

As we know, staff have worked tirelessly through challenging conditions over the last year and it has taken its toll. It is very much a topic that I discuss regularly with the Higher Education Taskforce that I chair in relation to student and staff mental health. We have also set up a mental health working group on higher education, so some of the work that we have been doing there is about ensuring that universities know all of the stuff available to be able to direct students to. We will be working on staff as well, so that the current support services are being utilised.

Recently, the Department of Health announced an additional £13 million of support to bridge the gap between children's mental health services and adult mental health services for those aged 18 to 25, and that encompasses students as well.

Looking ahead to next year, as you referenced, I am very keen that we ensure there is additional support for the transition to higher education. We know that is quite a stark move already, and then you add in the pandemic. It is not rocket science to assume that will place more concerns and pressures on people's mental health and wellbeing. We



have dedicated £12 million, working with the OfS, to assist with that, and some additional money for the mental health challenge fund.

We will continue to work on this and prioritise it. These problems are not going away. These problems will develop in the long term, that I am confident of, as the impacts of the pandemic continue to present themselves, but one thing can be sure, I will continue to prioritise this area. No student can be expected to perform in education unless their mental health and wellbeing has been looked after and prioritised.

Q586 Fleur Anderson: It would be good for the Committee to have some updates on the mental health group, what it will be doing and the outcomes of specific funding in the next year for mental health services and for the work that you will be doing on insecure employment and the stress of workloads. That would be good to hear.

My last question is on the removal of the London weighting from the Higher Education Teaching Grant, which was announced out of the blue in February and is of very great concern. Roehampton is a teaching university in London and has a very high number of first-time, first-generation students, diverse students, students living at home. They are very concerned about the impact of the London weighting being removed, which is effectively a 13.7% cut in funding, and what this will mean especially for recruiting teachers—because lots of them are trainee teachers—to the London schools where we need to have teachers. It is just more expensive to live in London. It is acknowledging the reality that we need to recruit these young teachers and that this will have an impact. Why did you decide to remove the London weighting, and would you consider reversing it?

Michelle Donelan: This is currently being consulted on by the OfS, and I would encourage you to input into that consultation. The grant we are talking about was formerly known as the teaching grant. It is now known as the Strategic Priority Grant and it is, in effect, the Government's top-up to universities, which is targeted in areas that we particularly want to ensure are linking up with the economy and the labour market, adding value to students and so on.

The London weighting, the Strategic Priority Grant, accounts for only 1% of universities' total income, so it is a very small amount that we are talking about here. In addition, we also set up a new £10 million fund, which is being consulted on, to assist universities and institutions that are particularly world leading in the arts and creative areas, and that will assist many in London. As I said, this is being consulted on and you have an opportunity to input into that.

Q587 Fleur Anderson: We certainly will. On the arts, Roehampton has had to cut its arts department because of the impact of Covid. You mentioned earlier that no university has taken up the additional support, but that support did not help Roehampton. There have been cuts that are maybe not seen in the round. It would be good to look into that further.



Michelle Donelan: Roehampton will have benefited from having the opportunity to utilise the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, will have benefited from the money that we brought forward, will have benefited from potentially taking out loans, so it has benefited from the support that has been available via the Government. If they have chosen to make decisions and not enter the restructuring regime, that was their choice.

Q588 **Fleur Anderson:** The loan was only for one year, so it was not very helpful in terms of their funding. They lost a lot of funding over the summer when we first locked down and from not being able to have conferences. They lost money that they were not able to get back in any other way. There was no Government support for them for that. They are unusual, and I have said this to you before, in being a university that does not have large reserves, so they have lost out disproportionately under Covid and there have been cuts as a result.

Michelle Donelan: I am not denying Covid has had a challenging impact on the higher education sector, including financially.

Chair: Thank you. I am sure you will continue this offline about Roehampton, Fleur, and I am sure the Minister will welcome that.

Q589 **Tom Hunt:** I have had a few conversations with constituents and those involved in student mental health, and one point that has come across is about rites of passage and being able to say goodbye to your school friends before you leave to go to university, go to a prom, have your freshers week and all that sort of thing. *[Interruption.]* Obviously, in conventional times you had your freshers year where you did not do a huge amount of work, but it was a very important year inasmuch as you moved away from home for the first time, got used to living away from home. *[Interruption.]* Some people might look at it as being quite important in terms of mental development for many first-year university students, and these students have often not had that first year to build good-quality relationships, and they are going from that year into a second year that is like a conventional second year, and then into a third year. Is that mental health support group going to be looking at what the experience of those students will be in their second and third years, if their first year, their freshers year, has been this pandemic year? My concern would be the potential mental health implications of expecting their second year to be exactly the same as it was for me in conventional times and—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: Your wi-fi cut off a bit when you were asking the question but I think Michelle got the gist of it. Could you answer it in a nutshell, please?

Michelle Donelan: Building back and catching up on the student experience is a priority for me and for universities, not just the academic side. It is something we have regularly discussed on the taskforce. I have asked UUK to share best practice in this area. That is easier for those first-year and second-year students, whereas it is much harder for those final-year students. That is one of the reasons why we wanted to get them back even if their courses have finished academically, to give them



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the opportunity to go back from 17 May. You are right that that needs to be a focus next year. That other side of university is valuable in forming those networks, your confidence, your other skills, as well as being part of the experience that university students expect and go to university for, as well as the academic side.

Q590 **Tom Hunt:** If your first year at university has been largely remote, largely restricted in terms of the people you meet, I imagine the number of people going into their second year who, frankly, will not have any flatmates or anyone to live with will be quite high. There will be a higher percentage of second-year students having to rely on going into student accommodation again, which usually they move out of in their first year. There are lots of unintended consequences of the first year they have had, and I am slightly concerned about what the mental implications could be on the development of those students.

Michelle Donelan: That is why it is absolutely essential that universities continue to prioritise mental health, wellbeing and student support services to address any issues that you identify with students not having those groups to form households with, or anything else, going forward.

Q591 **Kim Johnson:** Michelle, I want to know what the Government are doing about the increasing marketisation of higher education and the casualisation of many university jobs, and the disparity that exists between those staff and the extortionate salaries that vice-chancellors are on in universities.

Michelle Donelan: I think we discussed vice-chancellors' salaries last time I was at the Select Committee. I am on record saying that I think those salaries are far, far too high when you compare them with the Prime Minister's salary, and so on. We saw some fantastic examples during the pandemic of vice-chancellors coming forward and taking a pay cut so they could reinvest that money in student hardship and student support, and I would like to see some of those initiatives carry on in the long term. As you point out, there is a big disparity between some of the managerial and leadership roles in university and some of the educators and lecturers within higher education.

I think our fundamental principle of higher education, that those who benefit from it pay towards it, is the right one. However, in terms of reforming the higher education sector and considering the outcomes of Augar, we produced only the interim Augar before and now we are working on our final and comprehensive response to the rest of the Augar review. We will look to publish that in line with the spending review this year.

Q592 **Fleur Anderson:** Our Committee is conducting an inquiry on prison education, and a couple of questions have come up that we want to put to you. We have heard evidence from many organisations working in prisons about how difficult it is for many prisoners to pursue higher education but how beneficial it is to their rehabilitation. What discussions



have you had in Government about making the rules for student loans more flexible for prisoners serving longer sentences, and about the rule that prisoners can only start a higher education course if they have six more years left of their sentence? Before that time they cannot access higher education, which for many can be a gap between coming into prison and saying, "I want to start a degree," yet that is very likely to dissipate in the intervening years. Have you had any discussions about changing that rule?

Michelle Donelan: I believe the Ministry of Justice did a review of this a few years ago, and the review concluded that they should explore or look to relax the six-year rule a bit. I believe it is something the Ministry of Justice is considering, and I will continue working closely with it and across Government on whether that is possible. It is important that there is a limit, because if somebody is undergoing a life sentence there would be no benefit to their rehabilitation or the economy from their doing a course. It also has to be quite close to when they may be potentially coming out of prison so that those skills are still relevant and the degree is useful for their rehabilitation. Whether we can relax the six-year rule is something on which I will continue to have conversations with the Ministry of Justice, and I will feed back your thoughts.

Q593 **Fleur Anderson:** Thank you. I hope you look at our report when we bring it out, so we can come back to you with those recommendations.

Most courses are now online, but students have to do all their courses on paper. Is there an opportunity for some online, in a very restricted and very controlled way, to enable students to pursue those courses, which will enable them to come back into society more ready to contribute?

Michelle Donelan: That is something I would need to take up with the Ministry of Justice and the Prisons Minister, but I can assure you that I will have that conversation and then come back to the Committee.

Q594 **Chair:** What plans do you have as a Department to introduce minimum entry requirements for higher education applicants?

Michelle Donelan: In our interim Augar response we said that we would consult on it this spring. We very much have not fixed the policy. We want to listen to viewpoints on it. I think it is right that we look at this area. It is one of the things that Augar identified.

Q595 **Chair:** What is your view on it?

Michelle Donelan: My view is that we need to look at this area. If we look at the statistics, Augar found that, for the 2016-17 cohort, 12.8% of students with a UCAS tariff between 0 to 100, which is equivalent to a D and an E at A-level in the old scheme, did not progress beyond year one, and this is double the normal average. As we encourage students to select the best opportunity for them, be that in FE, apprenticeships or higher education, we need to ensure they are able to complete courses, especially as we work with universities to continue to lift the quality and standards.



Q596 **Chair:** How would you ensure that minimum entry requirements do not penalise Open University, which as you know welcomes students on low or no formal qualifications and has made such a huge difference to literally millions of students across the country over the years?

Michelle Donelan: This is very much why we are consulting on it, and we will also be consulting on what exemptions would be needed in any policy to make sure that it works and does not deter the likes of mature students, and so on, from being able to reskill or upskill.

Q597 **Chair:** There are figures that suggest that students who under-attain at A-level for one reason or another, maybe because of exam conditions or whatever it may be, do very well or much better in their degree subjects at university. If there was a minimum entry requirement, how would you deal with that situation?

Michelle Donelan: I want to stress that the Government are not going to be proposing that all students need to get three Bs at A-level, for instance. This is about having a debate around minimum entry requirements, having a consultation, looking at whether we need some exemptions, making sure there are other opportunities and options available for students who may need to gain other qualifications before entering higher education, but it is also about supporting students to make the right decisions, whether that is FE or HE. At this stage we have not fixed the policy. We really do want to listen.

Q598 **Chair:** In principle you are in favour of them, but with certain exemptions and exceptions. Is that what you are saying?

Michelle Donelan: I am in favour of exploring this area, as a potential, in response to the issues that Augar identified in his independent report.

Chair: That is a masterful Sir Humphrey answer, remarkable.

Michelle Donelan: We are consulting in this area. The Government would not be consulting in this area if it was not—

Q599 **Chair:** There are loads of things that you are consulting on and reviewing, but we want to know what the policy is. In a very gentle way, one can always bat away difficult questions by saying you are consulting on it, having a review and goodness knows what—a committee, a committee of committees or whatever it may be. I think you said in the early stages that, in principle, you support the idea of some kind of minimum entry requirement.

Michelle Donelan: I am not opposed to the principle. It is important that we get it right. However, you said you wanted to know the policy. We genuinely have not defined the policy, hence why we are consulting.

Q600 **Chair:** Are you aware of issues like the Open University and students who may decide to do a degree later on in life, who may not have done A-levels, and making sure that we do not deny those students those kinds of opportunities?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely, so any initiatives like this would need to bear in mind whether exemptions were needed, because the last thing we want to do is close doors to those who could benefit from having explored these opportunities.

Q601 **Tom Hunt:** I welcome the commitments from the Government on free speech, and also some of the comments made by the new chair of the Office for Students. I think it is a bit of a problem, with some of the statistics I see. We have had some high-profile examples of a former Home Secretary not being able to speak at Oxford University, and many other examples.

For me, there are two aspects to this: free speech and free research. The first being no-platforming, cancelling and student debate, but the other one is academic research. I read a report on this by Policy Exchange, and there were some pretty concerning statistics. I think one of the statistics said that 50% of right-leaning academics in non-STEM subjects self-censored their work and their research because they did not feel comfortable publishing it due to pressure from, I do not know, other people in the university. That is hardly surprising when there are also findings in this report that say that 46% of left-leaning academics would not be comfortable sitting next to somebody who had voted Leave in the referendum, and one third would not consider recruiting an academic if they were known to be a Leave supporter.

What is the Office for Students looking to do to try to make sure that right-leaning academics at universities feel confident to conduct the research they want to do, and to produce research of the highest quality?

Michelle Donelan: We are concerned about this, not just from the perspective of academics but also from students who should be able to challenge the status quo and discuss issues, and also from visiting academics and visiting speakers who are coming into institutions. Our universities should be hubs of free speech, innovation, challenging the status quo and pushing boundaries, and everybody should feel confident to be able to do that.

We published a paper on this a few months back, and we talked about creating a champion of free speech dedicated to supporting all those groups, a one-stop shop. We also spoke of making it a registration condition with the OfS and having a statutory tort so that there is a right to redress. There is already a law there, but it does not ensure that universities promote a culture of free speech. It is just one of the things that we want to do, as well as bringing students unions into scope. We are looking to legislate on this when the parliamentary timetable allows, because we think it is an important agenda and it was in our manifesto.

Tom Hunt: That is very reassuring. Certainly, from what I have seen, there seems to have been a problem in the past, and it is very important that the Government are addressing it in this way. Thank you.

Q602 **Kim Johnson:** Michelle, you just mentioned that the Secretary of State



for Education will be creating the post of a free speech and academic champion. Would you agree that this is just an extra level of bureaucracy, that it is unnecessary because universities have mechanisms to uphold free speech, that a board paper published by the Office for Students in 2018 found no evidence of free speech being systematically suppressed and that the no-platform cases that have been alluded to are very small? Would you say this is just an intensification of Tory culture wars?

Michelle Donelan: No, I would absolutely not say that at all. This is not about a right-wing or left-wing agenda. This is about encouraging a culture of free speech for all students, all academics. Universities should be hubs of innovation, pushing the status quo. We would not be where we are today if that had not been the case before. Tom has already pointed out some of the studies done by Policy Exchange; King's College also produced a study that highlighted issues. We can look at specific examples like Selina Todd, who is certainly not on the Conservative side of the spectrum, the right-wing side of the spectrum.

In addition, it is not just about no-platforming. That is one small element of this. What I find more concerning is the chilling effect that various studies have highlighted, and that students have spoken to me about, where they feel they cannot speak up on certain issues and certain areas. That is certainly not what should be happening in our universities.

There is already legislation on free speech and universities, but we know it is not necessarily being enforced. There are no adequate mechanisms to do so. It is highly complex and, by having this champion at the Office for Students, there is a one-stop shop, an individual who is specifically looking at this space, as well as it being a registration condition, as well as bringing students unions into scope, as well as promoting a culture of free speech. There are many aspects to the work that we want to do here, ensuring that it has teeth and that individuals, including academics, also have the right to redress through a statutory tort. It is important that we honour our manifesto commitment and deal with this item on our agenda.

Q603 **Kim Johnson:** You have previously commented that decolonising the curriculum is a Soviet Union-style censoring of history. Can you explain these comments and why you feel it is appropriate for someone in your position to make these comments, and will you apologise for them?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think you listened to my specific comments, you probably just read the headline, but I am happy to email you the podcast where I detailed my thoughts. I was specifically talking about where this agenda could go, and the fact that when countries in the past have looked to rewrite history it has been very dangerous. We know that has happened in a number of nations, such as the one you pointed to, and there is nothing wrong with what I said at all.



We know that decolonising history is not just about adding to the historical studies, in terms of the material they utilise or the individuals who are studied in relation to different points of history, which I am fully in favour of as a history student. What concerns me is the removal of parts of history, which is to the detriment of our knowledge and our understanding. We learn from history, warts and all. That is how society evolves. If we look at the recent issues around Sheffield, where they are looking at potentially removing Newton from physics, that is—

Chair: If you can move on, Michelle, please.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, finished.

Chair: Kim, do you have any more questions?

Kim Johnson: I just disagree. The curriculum needs to be looked at in more detail, and I will leave it there.

Q604 **Fleur Anderson:** Minister, you mentioned that you would be considering tying universities' free speech work to their registration conditions. Before, when we were talking about the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism and about sexual harassment conditions, you said you would not be tying that into universities' registration conditions and you would be waiting for consultations and seeing how it goes. Why would you bring it in for free speech but not for those two other areas of high concern for students?

Michelle Donelan: I did not say that. Sorry if what I said—

Fleur Anderson: It needs to be clarified then, thank you.

Michelle Donelan: On sexual harassment, I said we had met the Office for Students last week. We were considering if we needed to take further action in this space, including if they need more power to address it.

In terms of IHRA, it is not a legal requirement. However, we are encouraging universities to adopt that definition. As I said before, it is not a panacea. In fact, Bristol has already adopted that definition. The Secretary of State wrote to the OfS earlier in the year and asked them to do a scoping exercise, as well as potentially looking to mandate universities to report incidents, so there are different pockets of things that we are doing on all of this.

Q605 **Fleur Anderson:** So you are doing it on free speech, but you are waiting to do it or not do it in other areas? That was my question.

Michelle Donelan: No. On the anti-Semitism issue we have written to the OfS to see whether it should mandate universities to publish incidents. On sexual harassment, we are working with the OfS to consider next steps to see what more we can do. Freedom of speech was in our manifesto. It has been worked up. We have done a paper on it. That is why we are further down the road on that area.

Chair: Thank you. Michelle, you have been brilliant at being concise, so if you can carry on being concise, particularly as we are running out of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

time.

Christian, and then Jonathan and Ian.

Christian Wakeford: Thank you, Chair. Tom covered the questions I had in mind so, in the interests of being timely, I will back off.

Q606 **Jonathan Gullis:** Policy Exchange published a report last year that found that roughly 50% of university academics said they would feel uncomfortable sitting next to a known Leave supporter at lunch. More than half of right-wing academics feel there is a hostile climate towards their views. Most concerning, the report found that one third of right-wing academics have self-censored because of concerns about how it could impact on their career. Why are the woke mob ruining higher education?

Chair: Tom asked some of this, but if you could sum up briefly, Michelle.

Michelle Donelan: This is an important area that we are focusing on as a Government. It was in the manifesto, and we will be bringing forward legislation when the parliamentary timetable allows to address this issue, not just for academics but for students, visiting speakers, visiting academics and universities. As I said, it is important that universities are hubs of innovation and free speech so that they can continue to debate every issue and students can learn in an open and transparent environment.

Q607 **Jonathan Gullis:** At the end of the day, it is curtailing academic enquiry, which goes against the whole purpose of university, to hear different opinions from a wide variety of areas. Universities' reputations are on the line when it comes to this. Do you agree that this is probably one of the many reasons why lots of kids are now looking for alternatives, because they do not want to be in the self-censoring regime that seems to be taking over universities?

Michelle Donelan: I would say that a number of students are looking for alternatives to university because we have a fantastic offer in terms of FE and apprenticeships, and university is not necessarily always the best option for students. However, the free speech agenda is one that we are trying to tackle and we will be bringing forward legislation, because I agree with you that there is a problem and various studies have shown that. We have seen various examples of that. We have some of the world's very best institutions, and you are quite right that we would not want this to tarnish their reputation.

Q608 **Chair:** On the free speech issue, there have been cases where Jewish students might have invited a speaker, perhaps to do with Israel or whatever it may be, and the university has said that the students have to pay for their own security costs. So they have not denied the students having the speaker but they have made it virtually impossible, de facto impossible, because what student society can afford to pay thousands of pounds in security costs? Are you looking at those kinds of instances and making sure it does not happen?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michelle Donelan: Preventing the putting up of barriers to curtail free speech is very much at the heart of the work we are doing, and will do, to address this problem.

Q609 **Chair:** Whether it is de facto, so they are getting around the rules?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, exactly. It still has the same outcome.

Q610 **Ian Mearns:** As a spokesperson for the woke mob, I suppose, I come back to the question of sexual harassment in universities. You were asked a number of questions about this earlier, Minister, but it is clear that much of the problem has been occurring in plain sight. Should there not be an immediate inquiry rather than waiting for the fulfilment of a statement of expectations by the Office for Students? Ofsted is undertaking an urgent review of the situation in schools. Why do you not mirror that in universities? In universities, victims of harassment and assault often complain of being left in the dark about the outcome or the progress of university investigations, and they quite often feel that their disclosure has been a waste of time, traumatising but fruitless. Does it not require more urgent ministerial action than a statement of expectations from the Office for Students?

Michelle Donelan: This is something we are working on with the sector, including UUK, which I met the other week. They will be doing an update on their report, a progress report to examine the situation. Some of those cases on the website were historical, and I am not for one minute taking away from how horrific they were. UUK and I have spoken to universities about some of them, and they are historical cases. Processes have been put in place and the situation has changed.

As I said before, we are working with the OfS to see what more we can do in this area, because it is deeply concerning. I am going to meet the founder of the website to discuss the cases as well.

Q611 **Ian Mearns:** There are more revelations coming out almost daily, and I think you need to be acting with a greater sense of urgency.

Michelle Donelan: Certainly, this is an area of focus for the Government and I do not want to indicate that it is not. We are working with the OfS, and I get the point on urgency, of course I do, because some of these stories are deeply concerning. My message to anybody who has been impacted, of course, would be to speak up. The helpline that the Secretary of State launched with the NSPCC is available to university students or people later on in life who were impacted at a younger stage.

Ian Mearns: Except that, along with new revelations, we are also getting students coming forward to say they are being kept in the dark by the university institutions themselves about what is happening in terms of the investigations into their complaints. It really needs someone to undertake an overall, umbrella-like review. It is important.

Q612 **Chair:** I will finish by asking some questions on degree apprenticeships,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and Mr Hunt asked you about this earlier. A Sutton Trust report suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated a decline in apprenticeship starts, with a 46% drop between March and July last year, but the research says that higher apprenticeships have seen the biggest ever volume, representing a quarter of all starts in 2019-20, and that the trend should continue. Do we know how many higher-level apprenticeship starts there have been in the last year?

Michelle Donelan: I believe they have declined slightly with the pandemic. I can certainly send you the most recent statistics. However, my perspective is that they are still not high enough. I want students to have much more breadth of choice when it comes to whether they study a conventional degree or a degree apprenticeship. I spoke before about the value of degree apprenticeships, which I think we all recognise, and how there is a great deal of demand. I am not convinced that the supply necessarily meets the demand at the moment, which is why I am working with the likes of the Russell Group and other universities to try to encourage them and to understand what they perceive to be the barriers to putting on more of these degree apprenticeships.

Q613 **Chair:** Currently, individuals under the age of 19 from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are five times less likely to undertake a degree-level apprenticeship than those from the most advantaged areas. Of course, prestige is important and it builds apprenticeships, but should the increase in higher-level apprenticeships be put down to so-called hoax degree apprenticeships, middle-management MBA courses, rather than those helping disadvantaged school leavers?

Michelle Donelan: No, I do not believe it should, but, of course, we do need to work with universities to address the issue of ensuring that those from disadvantaged backgrounds recognise the opportunities, and are aware of the opportunities, of degree apprenticeships as much as those from advantaged backgrounds. That goes back to the point on more choice being available and helping to assist with that.

Q614 **Chair:** The reason I asked the question is because, in September 2019, there were 100 universities on the register of apprenticeship training providers, and just 59 mentioned apprenticeships in their most recent access and participation plans. I think that is wrong. Every university should be talking about apprenticeships in their access and participation plan. What is the Department doing to hold these universities to account? Should the OfS be doing more, and what are you doing with the Careers and Enterprise Company to promote degree apprenticeships in schools?

Michelle Donelan: I agree with you. I want every university to be putting on at least some degree apprenticeships and giving those opportunities to young people. They can transform lives. I want them in a range of subjects, and that is very much the message I have given to the sector. I am trying to work with them to understand what they perceive to be the barriers. It should not just be about sticks; it is also about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

carrots and trying to understand why some of them are not investing as much time and energy in this area.

In terms of the Careers and Enterprise Company, I work very closely with the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills and the Minister for School Standards to ensure that, at schools as well, young people are getting the information they deserve to make informed decisions and know about things like degree apprenticeships. Especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to deal with the problem you identified a moment ago.

Q615 **Chair:** How many universities are there overall, roughly?

Michelle Donelan: About 100.

Q616 **Chair:** So 100 on the register of apprenticeship training providers. As I mentioned, only 59% mention apprenticeships in their access and participation plan, which is pretty appalling. Surely those access and participation plans and funding should be rejected. It should be a requirement that they mention, support and promote degree apprenticeships in these access and participation plans. What is the point of them if you do not have apprenticeships and skills as part of it?

Michelle Donelan: We are currently considering what more we can do in access and participation plans to drive the changes that we want to see, including with degree apprenticeships, and also what other levers we have available to encourage and incentivise universities to open up more of these pathways to students, but it is not the only thing we are doing. We spoke about the lifelong learning entitlement, which will make higher education more flexible and accessible to all ages and stages to reskill and to upskill. For too long our higher education system has been very fixed.

Q617 **Chair:** I get all that, and it is great, but the easy thing you can do with these access plans is say, "No can do. No funds, no access funds, unless you put apprenticeships as part of it." That is an easy thing to do straightaway.

Michelle Donelan: Yes. Like I said, these access and participation plans were signed off, they were locked in, but we are considering what more we can do.

Q618 **Chair:** They should not be signed off. Who signs them off?

Michelle Donelan: They are already signed off as five-year plans. That does not mean that we cannot review them, and that is something we are actively considering.

Q619 **Chair:** When were the last ones signed off?

Michelle Donelan: They are done for five years. What I am trying to say to you is that we are currently reviewing what more we can do with access and participation plans to open up these important agenda items that, I agree with you, really can assist with social mobility.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q620 **Chair:** Should the funding be conditional on these access and participation plans including a plan or support for apprenticeships and skills?

Michelle Donelan: I am not going to confine myself to that specific measure in terms of funding, but it is certainly something to consider as we try to direct change and get change to happen in a quicker timeframe.

Q621 **Chair:** To understand, is the amount of access to these access and participation funds based on those plans? Is that correct?

Michelle Donelan: To be an approved OfS provider, you have to have an access and participation plan. That is not only about getting students through the door; it is about their journey through university, getting them to complete and then go on to graduate jobs.

Q622 **Chair:** The reason I keep mentioning this is because you could really make a difference. Yes, of course, there are lots of carrots you could offer, sweeping away bureaucracy and making it easier, incentivising companies, absolutely, but clearly there is a stick here. If the universities do not even mention it, a significant number as I highlighted, surely it is something you could do quite easily to push degree apprenticeships, to rocket-boost degree apprenticeships.

Michelle Donelan: Yes, and this is something we are looking at in terms of access and participation plans in general, not just in terms of degree apprenticeships.

Q623 **Chair:** Okay. It is just that there is a lot of consideration going on. I would love you to be able to say, "Yes, this is wrong. We are going to do something about it. It is unacceptable that 59 universities do not even mention apprenticeships." I accept you cannot tell me what you are going to do, but I would love you to say, "Yes, 100%, we are going to do something about it."

Michelle Donelan: I think I said that. I said that I completely agree with you, that we need to see more degree apprenticeships on offer for students in a greater breadth of courses and across the country. We are going to take action, and we are looking at various ways of achieving that. I cannot give you the details on that, or on certain other things, today, because there is a great deal of work being done by the Department in response to Augar and other stuff.

Q624 **Chair:** When do the five-year plans run out? When do they start the new ones?

Michelle Donelan: I do not think we should look at it as simply as that. There are other things that we can do in the interim. Just because they are five-year plans does not mean that we cannot review what we can do in this space. We are going to act to encourage more degree apprenticeships, in response to your question.

Chair: I know you have a passion for this. I am challenging the policy,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but I know that personally you care deeply about degree apprenticeships and skills, and you do a lot in the Department to try to promote them, just to make that clear and on the record.

Thank you so much for your time and for appearing today. It is really appreciated, and I wish you well in all that you do.