



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Universities and the pandemic](#), HC 779

Wednesday 27 October 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 October 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; Nicola Richards; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1 to 111

Witnesses

I: Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union; Professor Tansy Jessop, Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol; and Professor Liz Barnes, Vice Chancellor, Staffordshire University.

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

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jo Grady, Professor Tansy Jessop and Professor Liz Barnes.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming to our Committee today. For the benefit of the tape and for those watching on Parliament TV, can you kindly introduce yourselves and your organisation? I will start with Liz.

Professor Barnes: Professor Liz Barnes, Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive of Stafford University.

Professor Jessop: I am Tansy Jessop, Pro Vice Chancellor of Education at the University of Bristol.

Jo Grady: Hello, my name is Jo Grady and I am the General Secretary of the University and College Union.

Chair: I will bring in my colleague, Nicola, first as she has to go another Bill Committee.

Q2 **Nicola Richards:** Good morning, thank you for coming. My first questions are to Professor Tansy Jessop. Obviously it has been in the news recently, and throughout the year, about Professor David Miller and his views. Sorry to go straight into this, but his views, including his belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories, were well known before he was hired by the University. Why were his views not considered when he was hired and, since then, what steps has the University taken to prevent them from hiring anyone else who shares antisemitic conspiracy theories?

Professor Jessop: First, the inquiry is completed and I am not able to say anything more than is in the press statement of 1 October, where we made clear the dismissal of David Miller and the reasons for that. It is confidential. He may be appealing the decision, so I cannot go into the David Miller case.

Regarding our recruitment and hiring policies, like every good organisation, we have fair and equitable policies at Bristol. We hire people on their academic reputation, their capacity to teach, their research profile, and we stand by decisions we make to hire the best people on the day. I wasn't involved in the hiring but our policies are to hire in a fair and equitable way. That is what we do in our HR.

Q3 **Nicola Richards:** In a number of the University's communications on this, the University sought to paint a balance between views and concerns about anti-Semitism and others suggesting that the remarks were legitimate. Does the University accept that, in doing so, there has been tacit support for those eroding the lines on anti-Jewish racism by not firmly coming out and being firm in opposition to those comments?

Professor Jessop: An independent inquiry was ongoing while these media stories were circulating. We cannot comment on things while an independent inquiry is ongoing. The University has followed due process. It has had an independent Queen's Counsel and has come out with an



outcome that is robust and has followed due process. That is all I can say.

Q4 **Christian Wakeford:** To carry on that line of questioning, are you a safe space for Jewish students?

Professor Jessop: Yes.

Q5 **Christian Wakeford:** Obviously, when speaking to a number of J-Soc members they have been particularly concerned about the length of time the inquiry has taken and whether or not the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism has truly been adopted. Would you say that is a fair argument?

Professor Jessop: The University has adopted the IHRA definition. We were at senate in 2019 when we adopted it and we have met again and again with Jewish students and the Chair of the Jewish Society. He came to our University Executive Board recently. We have an ongoing dialogue with our students. We are a university that prides itself on diversity. We stand up for academic freedom and we stand up to have an inclusive community where our students feel they belong.

I think this inquiry is about the pandemic and coronavirus. That was my understanding of why I was here.

Q6 **Christian Wakeford:** I will follow through with a few very quick questions and I am sure we will get onto the pandemic later.

Having adopted the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, when is the University going to start enforcing it?

Professor Jessop: The University has a number of training programmes we run. In recent times, in our Inclusion Matters series, we ran one on Islamophobia and on anti-Semitism. We are addressing in every way any of the inclusion matters, just as the whole sector is keen to listen to different voices, to value different people and to be a safe space for disagreeing, for upholding academic freedom, for learning from one another. The mission of universities is to be spaces where diversity reigns, where we have a global diverse community where we accept differences in faith positions, differences in beliefs.

Q7 **Christian Wakeford:** One final question. What actions are the University going to take to repair the damaged relationship with the Jewish community? How is the University going to ensure that Jewish students are not afraid to go to Bristol, as I know that many are?

Professor Jessop: You are making assumptions here. I think we value all of our students and our student union has a number of societies. We are in constant dialogue with our students. I meet fortnightly with our student union sabbatical officers. We have equality liberation officers on that. We have a constant dialogue with our students to ensure that they feel included and that they belong at Bristol University.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Bristol is a university that prides itself on diversity. It was the first university in England to have women graduates—

Q8 **Chair:** Could you just specifically answer the question, which is about Jewish students?

Professor Jessop: Jewish students are welcomed, accepted and feel included at Bristol.

Q9 **Chair:** We are entitled to ask any questions we like because, at the end of the day, the universities are funded through the taxpayer and the loan system. Does the University acknowledge that David Miller's conduct was antisemitic?

Professor Jessop: I have said—and I will say it again—that I was not part of the inquiry. Bristol has conducted an independent investigation with an outcome and there is an appeal pending. I cannot say anymore because the inquiry is confidential.

Q10 **Chair:** If you have removed David Miller from your university there would have been a reason for it?

Professor Jessop: Yes. I can quote you chapter and verse on the press statement. It is on our website. It says in the press statement that he was not removed for unlawful speech, but he was removed for disciplinary reasons because he was not adhering to the codes of conduct we expect from our staff.

Q11 **Chair:** Let me ask you this question then. In your statement, because you said you want to quote the University's statement you said, "We recognise that these matters have caused deep concern for people on all sides of the debate, and that members of our community hold very different views from one another". By "all sides" do you mean racists and anti-racists? Why did your statement on the case ignore the fundamental point that the harassment of Jewish students at your university was nothing short of antisemitic?

Professor Jessop: We stand against all bullying, harassment and racism at Bristol University. Whether that be Islamophobia, anti-Semitism or racism of any description. We have an anti-racism—

Q12 **Chair:** What did you mean by "all sides"? In the statement when you said "concern for people of all sides" are you talking about the racists and the anti-racists? Is that what you meant by "all sides"?

Professor Jessop: We mean by "all sides" anyone who is affected by the case.

Q13 **Chair:** I have been to your university and I recognise it is one of the great universities but, given what has gone on, I certainly would not recommend any Jewish person to go to your university. I say that with great sadness because I think you are a hostile place for Jewish students, and I think what has gone on, and the time it took to deal with the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

situation, was pretty appalling. Do you not feel that you have let down Jewish students who are incredibly upset and concerned about the way the University handled this particular case?

Professor Jessop: I think the real question is whether we are a university that prides ourselves on diversity and inclusion of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, any faith or cultural background. The answer to that question is yes. We look after all our students, and the proof of that is that where there were complaints and where there have been complaints we have conducted independent inquiries into them and have had a disciplinary hearing—

Q14 **Chair:** If you look into what went on and how long it took, I think that most Jewish students feel that your university is a hostile place for Jews. If a Jewish person asked me should they go to Bristol, I would say go a million miles from your university given what has gone on. I feel that it was handled incredibly badly. I say that with great sadness because I recognise you are one of the great universities.

A question for UCU. David Miller receive a fair bit of support from the UCU members, prior to and following his dismissal from Bristol. UCU Scotland passed a motion condemning the attack on David Miller by so-called Zionist lobby groups. Can you just confirm if the UCU supports David Miller's conduct and, if not, will you distance yourself and the UCU from this activity?

Jo Grady: I would hope that you would understand that it is completely not appropriate for me to comment on this matter, neither on this specific case or on an individual.

Q15 **Chair:** Why is that?

Jo Grady: It is not even permitted for me to disclose whether a person is or is not a member of a union. You will know that is part of the—

Q16 **Chair:** Surely you are able to say whether you agree with the UCU Scotland motion condemning the attack on David Miller by so-called Zionist lobby groups?

Jo Grady: Again, I think it would be really inappropriate.

Q17 **Chair:** Why? Why is it wrong for you to say whether you agree or disagree with that?

Jo Grady: You are not asking me to say whether I personally agree or disagree with something. I am here in my capacity as General Secretary of UCU and it would be inappropriate for me to be passing comments on the democratic structures of UCU or, indeed, interfering by passing comment about individuals and their cases that still may be open to appeal.

Q18 **Chair:** This is just about a part of your union that passed a motion.



Jo Grady: Anything I say here about that could be used as part of any potential appeal in this case. It would be very inappropriate and potentially flying quite close to legal restrictions on what I should and should not say in my role as General Secretary.

Q19 **Chair:** Can you understand that Jewish groups who see that the UCU in Scotland believes that Professor David Miller has been attacked by Zionist lobby groups are upset that they are—

Jo Grady: I can completely understand that.

Q20 **Chair:** They will be expecting you to say, “Well, actually I don’t agree with this because I value all our Jewish members and Jewish students”.

Jo Grady: I can completely understand that but what I would ask you to understand, in the framing of your question, is you are asking me to step into a space where I would be potentially in breach of GDPR, in breach of—

Q21 **Chair:** No, you are not, because this is a public motion and you can just say whether you agree with it or not.

Jo Grady: No, because as General Secretary of UCU there are particular things that I should and should not be saying about people who may or may not be members, about people who may or may not be appealing any of these things, and that is not a reflection of my personal views on how Jewish students, Jewish members, anybody Jewish watching this may feel. I am asking you to understand that you are asking me to comment on things that would be inappropriate.

Chair: What you are doing is giving me a non-answer. I think that will be very upsetting for Jewish students and Jewish members of your union. You clearly know what has gone on and it is very sad that the UCU Scotland chose to take this point of view and this motion. Caroline.

Q22 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Professor Jessop, have you noticed any change in the number of applications from Jewish students to your university? This year you will have now received the medical, dental and veterinary applications that go in in October. Have you noticed any change or is it not something you record?

Professor Jessop: It is not something we have looked at. We don’t break down applications in that way.

Q23 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I take your point in terms of this meeting this morning. It is identified as “Universities and the pandemic”. It perhaps should have been reframed as “Universities and anti-Semitism”. I want to ask a question of you, Professor Jessop, because there has been issues and challenges in terms of hierarchy, of racism. I am aware that students also raised issues about Islamophobia but their complaint was not upheld.

Professor Jessop: Both inquiries were conducted with an independent investigation. Both inquiries at Bristol found that the people concerned



HOUSE OF COMMONS

were not guilty of unlawful speech. In one case a disciplinary hearing found that the conduct of the person was not up to the standard that we expect from our staff. I think we should leave it there.

Kim Johnson: Thank you.

Q24 **Chair:** This is a question for Staffordshire and for Bristol. You said that you wanted to have diverse students. The University of Bristol has a social inclusion ranking, according to the *Times Good University Guide*, of 114, whereas Staffordshire University has a social inclusion ranking of six, with 97.2% of admissions from state schools. How is it that Staffordshire is able to outperform Bristol University on these critical matrixes, and what practical measures are you taking to improve access to your university for disadvantaged pupils? I will hear from both of you and I particularly praise Staffordshire for the work that you are doing.

Professor Jessop: Bristol has changed and is changing on social justice measures. There are a number of ways in which we have implemented new policies and actions that link up our outreach programmes with our admissions and address structural inequalities. One of those is our contextual offer programme, which has shown in the last five years a move from 61% state school admissions to 75%. Another is our fantastic Bristol Scholars programme, which is the local area draws in students who have particular disadvantages and enables them to enter Bristol University. We have seen some remarkable achievements with that.

I will give you a case study on our website. Joshua Greenfield, at age 13, dyslexic, could not read, came to our university because he stumbled across one of our foundation programmes. He then took a degree, having got a 2:1 in our foundation programme, in our amazing centre for innovation and entrepreneurship programme. He now runs the Bristol Entrepreneurs Society.

Q25 **Chair:** That is a great example. It is one case.

Professor Jessop: Yes, we have lots of cases of that.

Q26 **Chair:** You are pretty low down in terms of having people from disadvantaged backgrounds, according to the rankings.

Professor Jessop: We are making progress. We are changing. We are continuously improving. We have a Bristol Black Scholarship programme. We have a Bristol Scholars programme. Our outreach at Bristol meets up with our admissions in a powerful way. We have a target in terms of our civic engagement of having 15% of our students from local areas by 2030. At the moment we have 7.5%. We have lots of partnerships with disadvantaged aspiring schools and academy trust schools. We are doing a real mission on widening participation.

Q27 **Chair:** What is the secret of Staffordshire's success?

Professor Barnes: Our mission is all about social mobility. We have a significant number of partnerships with schools and colleges. We offer



HOUSE OF COMMONS

foundation courses with our colleges to enable those students that might not have had success in school to come through to the University. We also run partnerships with the YMCA, for example, where young people may have dropped out very early, to help them move into university. We have a significant number of mature students as well, so 42% of our students are mature and have returned to learning later in life. It is all about the partnerships we build and the progression routes that we can support through that. Partnerships start in primary schools, as mentioned, through our multi-academy trusts and partnerships with other schools across the county.

Q28 **Chair:** What are your outcomes for the disadvantaged pupils that you have from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of getting good skilled jobs when they leave?

Professor Barnes: Our outcomes are very good in terms of moving into employability. Different around the Graduate Outcomes latest survey for 2017-18. In the last DLHE survey we had 81% of our students and graduates in graduate level jobs. We do a lot of work with industry to ensure that all of our students have placements and have the opportunity to engage with the workplace while they are learning in the University.

Q29 **Chair:** You do a lot of work on degree apprenticeships?

Professor Barnes: We do. We have over 2,000 degree apprenticeships.

Q30 **Chair:** Degree apprenticeships—my two favourite words in the English language, because people can earn while they learn, no debt and they get skilled jobs. If you had a magic wand, what should be done to expand degree apprenticeships much more? I will start with you, Tansy.

Professor Jessop: Some of your skills for jobs and flexible learning plans that the Government are putting in place provide some opportunities for more learning on the job and different ways of conceiving of degrees. I think we are exploring the space of flexible learning to expand our offer.

Regarding apprenticeships, I think it was unfortunate that the register was closed for so long. We are glad it is open again so that we can get going with that. Covid has had an impact on industry to the extent that they can accommodate apprenticeships. We need to rebuild relationships with industry and business to enable more apprenticeships.

From my perspective in Bristol, the spin out and start-up companies that are such a feature of Bristol's landscape could be good places to have apprenticeships. We would quite like more support from Government around internships as graduates leave universities.

Professor Barnes: Roll out of standards as quickly as possible because obviously we are looking for the new standards for different areas of employability and different industries. Also, sometimes the bureaucracy can make it very difficult. During this last period end point assessments,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

which have to be conducted externally, were all put on hold. Therefore, we had a 50% drop in completion during that period. If they could be made less bureaucratic and easier to deliver. We have over 2,000 apprentices currently and we are growing rapidly.

Q31 Chair: Finally, before I pass to Tom, how many pupils chose to defer their place at universities were from disadvantaged backgrounds, and what steps are you taking to ensure that oversubscription and intense competition does not lead to fewer pupils from disadvantaged background accessing university?

Professor Barnes: We have had no change in deferrals this year from disadvantaged students. What we have seen, though, is a significant drop in applications from mature students because they don't have the confidence in this current period to apply.

Professor Jessop: I don't have the number to hand of deferrals of disadvantaged students. We have obviously had overshoots because of grade inflation at A-level and we have tried to encourage a little bit of deferral so that we can accommodate students. We have only had about 84 students defer.

Q32 Tom Hunt: How confident are you the Government's Bill on freedom of speech in higher education will effectively address concerns around free speech and academic freedom?

Jo Grady: I have to say I do not think we are very confident at all. Maybe I will present an alternative view from the ground and from university staff. We have been concerned that during this period of the pandemic, which has resulted in an exponential rise in workloads for staff, incredible amounts of stress and burnout and required them to risk their own health and safety, that pursuing this Bill has been seen as the priority of the Government.

That has not gone down well with staff that this has been seen as one of the most important things to do when the sector has been in utter chaos. It is important to put that on record.

Back to the Bill in particular. If I was to comment on behalf of staff in the sector, we think that it narrows academic freedom at a time when we have been saying that should be broadened. We are really concerned in the UK, and UCU have been involved in submitting a document in UNESCO, that what we are seeing is the targeting of staff. That freedom of speech impedes academic progression, particularly when it comes to casualisation and that there are other practices afoot in universities that limit your ability for academic freedom.

At the University of Leicester, for example, we have seen dozens of people made redundant during this pandemic because their research activities do not align with the universities' priorities. What we want to see is a just and open system of career development, including fair procedures, appointment, tenure and promotion, so the widening of that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

definition. I think the entire direction of this Bill has been a real misdirection of energy during a year when staff really wanted to know that they were supported by Ministers and that their energy and efforts were being rewarded. We are not confident and we think that we should be seeing a broadening of that to take into account that there are managerial threats to freedom of speech and academic freedom on campus.

Professor Jessop: To build on what Jo has said. Our concerns are also around duplication in the OFS. We have a complaints procedure that works. We have quite a lot of working freedom of speech in universities where we have prized diversity. We are concerned what the roles will be between the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and the director of free speech in the OFS. The clarity around that worries us.

We are also slightly worried about the tort in terms of individuals making cases about freedom of speech, whether these will be proportionate. We are a bit concerned—and that is the Universities UK position and the Russell Group position—about individual tort and cases being raised that are disproportionate or frivolous compared to the issues.

Q33 **Tom Hunt:** On the topic of academic freedom and free speech, Jo, how would you respond to the view that many hold that the local branch of UCU in Sussex effectively hung Professor Kathleen Stock out to dry?

Jo Grady: Again, I would say it would be completely inappropriate of me to speak about individuals. The branch at Sussex were very clear in any statement that they put out that they condemned bullying. They were not calling for anybody to be dismissed. To suggest so is defamatory and I would suggest people go and read the statement.

Q34 **Tom Hunt:** Reflecting on the very troubling incident and no doubt the mental health impact there has been on Kathleen Stock, who was a member of the UCU, do you think there was anything more that your union could have done to support her?

Jo Grady: Again, I am not going to comment on whether or not people are or aren't members of our union and whether or not you think a union should be doing something for people.

Q35 **Tom Hunt:** Do you think you could let me know what TERF blocking software is?

Jo Grady: I guess you would have to Google that.

Q36 **Tom Hunt:** It is very intriguing because, if you are a union standing up for academic freedom, it may be hard to have confidence in you, if you are a member, if you are expressing views like that routinely.

Jo Grady: You should Google something rather than asking me to do your research for you.

Q37 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you for the limited information you have provided.



Should universities be continuing with online and remote learning when other restrictions have been lifted?

Professor Barnes: The feedback from students is that the majority want some form of face to face learning.

Q38 **Chair:** How much online versus face to face are you doing?

Professor Barnes: We guarantee our undergraduate students three days on campus with a mix of formal classes and extracurricular activity. The feedback from our students is approximately 80% wanted to come back for face to face. Nationally students—I think it was 51% but I can confirm that—said that they wanted a mix of online and face to face.

Q39 **Chair:** What percentage are you doing, roughly, online versus face to face?

Professor Barnes: We have gone back to how we always were. We have always supplemented with some high quality online but we have not shifted the balance. We have redressed it and gone back.

Professor Jessop: Our blended learning offer at Bristol has been quite transformative for student learning. We have—

Q40 **Chair:** What is the percentage currently of online learning versus face to face?

Professor Jessop: We have taken a bold step in March, before all the restrictions were lifted, to ensure that our students got in person education when they returned in lectures, seminars, laboratories and I would say it is about two-thirds of their curriculum is in person. The rest is online live, asynchronous.

I just want to underline that student perceptions are changing because it is a bit of an unfinished symphony around blended learning. I don't think we have bottomed out, whether online and blended is something that students want going forward. I think if we switched off all our online media they would be quite anxious. The longing for more in person education is partly borne of the scarcity. I think we need to play a longer game around in person and online.

Jo Grady: I will try and give a very short answer but I just need to make a reference to this time last year. UCU were the main party that called for the bulk of teaching that could be done online to move online last summer. We truly believe that if that had have happened we would not have seen the massive amounts of disruption that we saw. I reference that, not to be kept in the past but what we are hearing from students, via our members, is what they want is a mode of delivery that is predictable and that will not be changing.

We would like to do it in person—and I think the blended approach that is happening is happening quite well—but it is still prudent in this moment, I think, to be keeping some things online that can be kept online.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Students have reported quite high levels of satisfaction with the online learning that they have been getting. What students are not happy with is the wholesale disruption of having to pivot between in person, online, lockdown and not and that being inconsistent. In this moment, while we are still seeing increasing rates of not just Covid but death and living with the consequences of long Covid, which many young people have because they contracted it in their university accommodation and institutional buildings, I do think we should be taking a prudent view. Not just to stop the virus transmitting but also to give students a consistent mode of delivery that they know is happening.

- Q41 **Tom Hunt:** I think there is a *Time* survey that said 60% of students who had been studying before the pandemic and during the pandemic felt that their tuition had been either severely or moderately impacted by the move to online. It would seem there is a significant body, if not a majority, of students that do not have the most positive view.

Jo Grady: Without a doubt people are not happy, right, but part of that student experience—and I don't know what everybody's background is—is being on campus, is talking to people outside of the classroom. Those 50 minutes in a lecture theatre or a seminar room are clearly important but for a lot of students that experience is far greater than just that engagement in the classroom. That is the product, unfortunately, of a global pandemic that is highly transmissible when people are in close proximity to each other. University buildings, not like these corridors out here, tiny, surfaces that cannot be washed frequently. They were incubators of the virus.

- Q42 **Tom Hunt:** At what point would you feel comfortable to say, with a lot of confidence, that now is the time to completely go back to in person? What would the environment have to look like for you to feel confident to say that?

Jo Grady: I am not a scientist. I would want to be led by epidemiologists and by scientists who can genuinely say these are mitigations. In terms of back in person, it is not a switch on or a switch off. What we have been saying consistently—and this is the blended learning approach—is there are certain courses that really need to be in person. If we can have universities at a staggering level of capacity, whether that is 20% to 30% to 40% or however as we get back to 100%, we need to prioritise what must be in person.

The conversation has not been about good pedagogy, about who needs to be back. Ironically, because the second wave, I think, was triggered by the mass return to university campus, courses that needed to be in person had to go online because the cases got so bad and things were so dangerous. I think this rush to be in person, beyond all else, is hindering our ability to do it in a safe, managed and pedagogically sound way.

- Q43 **Tom Hunt:** Fortunately, obviously, the vaccine puts us in a dramatically different position to what we were. It was mainly the Kent variant that is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

highly transmissible that led us to where we were. The vast majority of university students are not vulnerable to Covid-19, particularly when they have been vaccinated.

Regarding the point about the student experience being so disrupted and not being able to join to societies and so on, much of the university experience not being what it has been, much of the tuition being online, what do you think about partial fee reductions and so on? Do you think there is a strong case for that? Have your universities done anything in that space?

Professor Barnes: The online support for students now and the learning is a really expensive offer. We have moved to a lot of immersive technologies and that means buying expensive mannequins and so on. We are assessing students online at times for healthcare courses, which has helped us to keep them moving through. If you are trying to double up both classroom face to face and supporting student remotely, we need to improve the technologies we have to do that, so the investment in technology is huge.

I think the point that Jo was making, the teaching we are doing now is not like the teaching we did back at the first lockdown when we had to react very quickly, when you have a lot of talking heads and conversations online. We have gone to sophisticated approaches. We are rebuilding some of our field trips as virtual field trips, but all of that takes significant investment. We have virtual laboratories but you have to build them.

All of those give students more opportunity almost. Our balance of what we do online and in the classroom means, if you have a virtual lab, a student can go back to that piece of equipment and learn how to use it, practice it in a safe environment and have more opportunity. It is not a cheaper option. What we are doing now in terms of the technologies available is a more expensive option ultimately.

Professor Jessop: We understand the strength of feeling from students about tuition fee refunds. At the same time, we know that we have delivered a high quality offer, thanks to our fantastic staff. They have been impressive. From the get-go we put in place digital design courses and have made a step change in our teaching from quite traditional didactic models of teaching to more student-centred interactive teaching. In our first Pulse survey in November, 82% of students said that they were learning really well online. We feel we have done a cracking job with online. Our staff have been impressive.

One thing I would just say as we return to in-person education, there is a real buzz about campus and one of the things our scientific advisory group says—tacking on to Jo's comment—is that transmission is not really taking place in teaching spaces. It is in residential accommodation. Last year even it wasn't principally in our teaching spaces. That is our finding at Bristol.



Q44 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** When students look to apply for next year, what information are they being provided with on how their course is being taught and what proportion of it is being taught virtually and what proportion of it is being taught in person, so they are able to make informed choices about where they would like to study and the course they would like to learn?

Professor Barnes: That is all a standard part of what we deliver on the open day. They have an opportunity to visit the facilities but they are also told about the online learning opportunities and student support opportunities online. They can also find that on the website. That has always been part of the student application process in finding out more about how their courses are delivered, which varies from discipline to discipline.

Professor Jessop: This year we said, "Please come back for an on campus experience" and we will be saying the same next year. We are working out the intentional integration of online and in person. We are at two-thirds in person at the moment. We are evaluating how that goes in terms of students learning through the year.

Q45 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Does the online learning for lectures and things offer the opportunity to teach more students, particularly where you have had courses such as medicine where you have been asked to take more students because of the grade inflexion? Do you find it easier to hold lectures when a larger number could be held online than you can get in a lecture theatre?

Professor Jessop: There are economies of scale with online but our rationale has to be pedagogical and for the best student experience of learning. The design of the curriculum in each school will look at what works best in the blend, rather than: can we pile them high in an online lecture? That is not our mission. Our mission is to give the best education to our students.

Professor Barnes: The feedback from our students is that for the synchronous sessions online, small groups still work better than large groups. Where it works well online is for asynchronous learning. For a long time, before the pandemic, it was not unusual to put a lecture online because you could lay over it the resources that students should access, you can lay on questions and challenges. That is where online can work for big groups. In the main, it isn't that different online to face to face but, if you want a positive interactive session, you are better with smaller groups even online.

Q46 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Another question I had was to Jo. Jo, you talked about delivery being predictable and not changing as being important to students, and that wholesale disruption is harmful to the students' degree. I was talking to a young gentleman yesterday afternoon who has just completed his degree. One of the things he found most disruptive during the pandemic was not actually online learning particularly but the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

strikes and that, during his dissertation, he was unable to get a response even to an e-mail for three weeks out of every four, which obviously meant he could not then make progress until the teacher came back from their strike.

Do you think that in the middle of a pandemic, when people are facing challenges up and down the country, when people are living on 80% of their salary, when people have been made redundant that then was the time to go on strike and cause even more disruption to these young people at the start of their careers?

Jo Grady: One point of correction, because obviously the strike was ongoing before the pandemic began. The strike had been balloted on before, I think, even news of Covid had reached the UK in December.

To return to your question, because I think it is a really good question and, given that I share a panel with two people who are in senior management in universities, I would be quite interested to know their point of view on it. You mentioned people living on 80% of their salaries. The reasons we have been taking strike action in HE in the UK is there has been a pay cut of 20%. Our university managers tolerate a 17% race pay gap, a 15% gender pay gap, a 9% disability pay gap. We have had £240,000 cut from the value of our pension in the last 10 years with a further 35% to follow. We are asking that employers address these things.

In terms of the equality pay gaps, we are just asking that they come up with plans to close them over time. You are talking about the dissertation supervisor of this student, for all I know they are one of the 75,000 members of higher education staff that are employed on an insecure contract. The sad fact for this young man that you spoke about is that person could disappear tomorrow anyway, because many of them are on nine-month contracts, their contracts were not renewed during the pandemic—which I referenced earlier—many of their jobs are under threat or non-renewed. We are not taking strike action because we think it is fun or we enjoy not being there for students. We are the very people that are suffering.

This is a dirty secret of higher education, that the entire system is kept afloat by people who often are one month away from being made homeless. Indeed, I have spoken to UCU members, who are not only members of administrative staff in the university they work for but teaching staff. They have had to spend time in sheltered accommodation because their salary does not cover the basics that they need to get by.

I hear the complaints of students, and I hear the disruption, but I would like to know why people on the managerial board of their universities would rather see UCU members ballot yet again for action to ask for the bare minimum of dignity in the workplace. Raj Jethwa, who is the head of UCU wrote to UCU last week. He did not even mention casualisation, that it is something they would negotiate on with us.



My heart goes out to students who do not want more disruption but my heart is firmly with UCU members who want to be able to live with dignity, because, at the end of the day, our working conditions are students' learning conditions. That is the duty of people managing institutions, many of whom are on £250,000, £500,000 salaries, so they can find the money for themselves.

Q47 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I understand that there are challenges to working conditions but the question was: is during a pandemic, when people up and down the country are losing loved ones, when there are people in hospital that are worried, when doctors and nurses are working shifts around the clock—in incredibly difficult circumstances themselves—when many are putting themselves at risk to continue to do their jobs in our supermarkets and such like—

Jo Grady: UCU members are those people.

Dr Caroline Johnson: —that that was the time to start complaining about your particular job? I appreciate there may be very good arguments for why your job conditions may need to be improved but, at that particular time of the pandemic, when so many other people are facing so many challenges and the whole country is pulling together to do everything they can, when you hear of nurses moving into hotels to protect their families, is that really the time to be causing—

Chair: Can you answer in a nutshell?

Jo Grady: I can answer, give me two sentences. First, we called our strike action in March. Second, UCU members are those people. They sacrificed their own health during the pandemic. A 17% race gap, a 15% gender pay gap, 9%—

Chair: You said all that before.

Jo Grady: These could be closed tomorrow. We are those people you have just referenced. These are not immovable facts of nature. The disruption could be prevented by people like the panel next to me.

Professor Jessop: I would just say we are working on the very issues that Jo has raised across the sector, and I will just cite Bristol. The gender pay gap you cited in an article recently has been closed significantly at Bristol with intentional work. Our precarious contracts we have reduced by 25% in the last couple of years. We are working hard on that.

The national issues, we have bought into sector agreements around USS pensions. There is a statement on the Russell Group website. Pensions are complicated because they are not just employer/employee. They are also pension regulator, pensions trustee, so it is a more complicated scenario to address. We obviously respect the right of our colleagues to strike but, as a PVC Education, I am quite concerned about our students.



I think of our third year students who have had industrial action in first year and they have had Covid for 18 months, I want to work actively and constructively with our UCU to try to avert a strike—I know the ballot is ongoing at the moment in November, December or January—because I think our students will suffer more than they need to.

Q48 Dr Caroline Johnson: The disruption I heard from this young gentleman yesterday was quite extreme, three weeks out of four, what are you doing to minimise this disruption?

Chair: Just one sentence, please.

Professor Jessop: If you look at the Universities UK website you will see that, reluctantly, our blended learning helps us to keep some of our teaching going during that period.

Professor Barnes: Just yesterday at senior leadership team we reviewed our disability gap, our gender pay gap and the ethnic minority pay gaps, all are decreasing, in fact some work the other way now. We are very committed to ensuring that any pay gaps are closed and we are taking proactive actions. That is all in hand.

As mentioned, we are all on the national pay frames and therefore working nationally to support the way we move forward. We also want to avoid strike action because at this time it is the worst thing we could do for our students. We want to maintain the best student experience through the year.

Q49 Apsana Begum: My question is maybe for Jo. Are there any particular student groups that have thrived with the blended learning approach? I want to get a sense from the others as well in terms of mature students and other groups. Are there other ones that have thrived and have found that approach useful? Are you considering ways in which that can be continued for those particular groups?

You have given quite a lot of textbook answers, if I may say, around questions to ethnicity pay gaps and gender pay gaps. Do you think it is acceptable for senior leadership postholders to be earning things like £250,000 a year when there are so many staff members of universities earning £20,000, £15,000 and on insecure contracts? There is a lot that has been exposed in the pandemic, but do you think it is acceptable for senior management to be earning that much when staff do not earn near that at all and there is a huge inequality in terms of the pay of senior management teams and staff at lower levels.

Professor Barnes: I will start off with the point about the students that have gained during this period. We know that for some our commuter students they found it an advantage to not have to travel in every day. The move to three days on campus will be maintained going forward because they want to have fewer days where they are travelling in.

Q50 Apsana Begum: Is that the younger group, did you say?



Professor Barnes: It is a mix actually. You have young groups and mature students, so the cost of commuting but also the time of commuting and balancing it with part-time jobs. The other group where we are still getting some requests is from some of the students that are suffering severe mental health challenges. They have preferred to be off campus. Again, we are trying to work out how to manage that going forward if you want more face to face. Those are two groups that can say there are some advantages. Those who have caring responsibilities also find it easier to do more study at home. We are trying to get that balance right and give students more choice ultimately.

As to senior salary pay, we are paid according to responsibilities. Our pay is assessed and awarded independently by our governors. We do not make the decisions on that, but I think it is about levels of responsibility that go with the role.

Professor Jessop: I would endorse what you say about pay, Apsana. In terms of mature students and students who are benefiting from blended learning, the thing we have noticed is that students feel more able to ask questions because it is anonymous on a digital tool and there is a sense in which, from my perspective, blended learning offers a more democratic route to participation among many of our students. We see that in our surveys: "I feel I have more confidence to participate online. Being anonymous enables me to ask questions, which is amazing".

I think you will see in the Student Academic Experience survey—I can't remember which one—that mature students, when you disaggregate their satisfaction levels on the national student survey there are about the same number satisfied as they were before. Whereas all other students are 7% less satisfied. Therefore, mature students are benefiting from the blended learning flexibility because they often are carers.

Q51 **Apsana Begum:** I thank you for that contribution but I find the answers to my questions on pay quite unsatisfactory, because we are talking about not one individual, maybe two or three individuals in a university earning £250,000. Why has there not been a resolution and a solution to problems around ethnicity pay gaps, gender pay gaps. These things should exist. Therefore, if somebody is earning £250,000, it is in your job description to resolve these problems but you are sat there saying governors decide the pay. It is decided independently. How can it be justified that people earn that much money, yet there are these widespread issues across the country and it affects people's lives much beyond university. We all know that?

Professor Jessop: I think the important message here is that leaders of universities are leading large complex organisations, just like any other CEO. There is an independence to the allocation of their salaries and they are addressing gender and ethnicity pay gaps and casualisation. There is an agenda to address those things. That would be the answer I would give you. That is the message we are taking forward.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q52 **Apsana Begum:** Are you able to say how many British black professors there are in the country?

Professor Jessop: There are very few female black British professors. We have the only black British female history professor in the country.

Q53 **Apsana Begum:** That is a small number, isn't it?

Professor Jessop: It is a tiny number. It is a scandal and we need to address it.

Jo Grady: I will be very quick. I am glad this conversation has happened because I want to refer back to Dr Johnson's question about: is this the right time for staff? Our members, many of whom during the pandemic who were casualised, were not even in possession of a university laptop to put lectures online. They had to use their own materials. The idea that there are people who are running our universities who are saying, "We don't make decisions about what we are paid, no". Well, you make decisions about how many zero hour contracts you have. You make decisions about how many casualised staff you have. You make those decisions. You make decisions that could influence UCEA to prevent this disruption. For those of you in USS, you make decisions that could prevent the disruption around that dispute.

It is a complete distancing of responsibility. Often I am told vice chancellors and senior management in universities are paid these substantial amounts of money because they are influential and because people listen to them. I want to know where they are right now because I don't see them. I don't see them pushing for a resolution before we even get to the end of the ballot, let alone declare any intention to take strike action.

Chair: You said you would be quick. Thank you. Caroline has a quick rejoinder.

Q54 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Given the fact that everyone else is pulling together to help the country, and given the fact that the students were already suffering through Covid, do you think there was another way that you could have dealt with this that did not involve creating much more disruption and spoiling the education of so many young people?

Jo Grady: Do you think staff have not pulled together to do their best for students? Do you not think they have kept universities single-handedly going during this pandemic. That is a serious question.

Q55 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** In this particular young man's case he was only getting education one week in four.

Jo Grady: That is not an answer to the question. University staff are working weekends to keep universities going. Over half of them are reporting to us symptoms of depression. The idea that they have not pulled together is offensive to university staff.



Q56 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Do you think there is another way they could have gone about it?

Jo Grady: This is the way that UCU members have asked their union to represent them. This is the way they have chosen, because they have tried every other way.

Q57 **Kim Johnson:** I would like to declare a member's interest because of my connection with UCU as a prospective Chair of the UCU Parliamentary Group. Jo, a question for you. As you have just mentioned casualisation and the marketisation in higher education, can you say how this has impacted on the resilience of the sector?

Jo Grady: I think it is cannibalising itself. This isn't just a reserve army of labour. This isn't just a right of passage for young staff, this is killing the sector. This is people not being able to pursue their research interests. To go back to the young man denied dissertation supervision, this is students not even being able to identify where their lecturer is in several years' time for a reference from them.

This is no career pathways for people. This is people spending decades and decades in insecure employment, frequently with three different employment contracts across three different universities, unable to build a life for themselves and an academic career path, or indeed any kind of dignified social life. It is not alarmist when I say that the rotten employment practices, the dirty secret of rampant casualisation in this sector is slowly but will destroy what is the jewel in the crown of the UK and a globally respected education sector.

Q58 **Kim Johnson:** I would have to disagree with the "all pulling together" scenario because we know that, during this pandemic, unscrupulous employers have been attacking workers and workers' rights, right throughout this pandemic. University workers doing more for less is a major issue at this moment in time, would you agree?

Jo Grady: I would agree and it is staff that run Zoom calls, providing mental wellbeing support to students, not vice chancellors or senior management. It was staff delivering food packages to students who were trapped in their accommodation. It was staff standing up for students who were being racially profiled by security guards who were trapped in their accommodation. As I say, the very idea that staff have not pulled together and done their best is offensive. They have gone above and beyond and they are asking for just pay gaps to be closed.

Professor Barnes: The staff have been absolutely fantastic. The University could not have operated without them, of course, and the students have had a very positive experience with our staff. What has been important through this period is that our union representatives, the senior teams and the staff have all worked collectively to come up with an approach and work with the students' union as well to ensure that we do deliver as best we can within this environment.



Q59 Kim Johnson: Just picking up on that point, Liz. In the middle of the pandemic, Liverpool wanted to make 47 workers within the health and life sciences redundant but, with the work of UCU and the students together collaboratively, they were successful in not sacking those 47. It is very much about the collaboration with the universities and the students identifying and working together to resolve these issues. The issues about students losing time during study has been raised by my colleague, but the universities and the staff did everything that they could to make sure that those students got a service and an education, would you agree?

Jo Grady: Yes.

Professor Jessop: I just want to say that in our university and your university in Liverpool, I don't recognise the picture of such an adversarial set up, as has been painted, in terms of the collaboration that has been enabled through the pandemic between our union colleagues, our student union and our senior staff.

Q60 Kim Johnson: My last question is about how the pandemic has affected students' prospects for employment and further education, particularly black and diverse students?

Professor Barnes: The biggest challenge for students is about the graduate opportunities. Fortunately, they are increasing rapidly. There have been some problems, particularly, for students who are in teaching and in healthcare professions where they have a backlog of hours to make up in practice, but the majority of those have been caught up. With agreement, we have been able to do some of that through simulation.

The key thing through this period has been trying to get virtual placements for students to enable them to have more experience. It has impacted but careers services have worked quite effectively in working with business to find opportunities.

Professor Jessop: Yes, just to add to what Liz said. Career services have worked quite hard to help students articulate their strengths and skills because confidence coming out of the pandemic in terms of job interviews is important. Some of the isolation has played out in a lack of confidence. I am pleased to see the job market opening up a bit so that students can now apply.

Q61 Kim Johnson: That does not answer my question about diversity. We know, as a fact, that black students tend not to do as well after graduating at university as their white peers. Is there any significant difference now because of the pandemic?

Professor Jessop: We have not had the official figures on that because they are collected further down the line. We are aware of some gaps and what we have just put in place is more mentoring, so getting members of ethnic communities out there in employment who are working with our



HOUSE OF COMMONS

graduates to help them find employment and with our students. We are aware of the gaps. They are there. They always have been.

Chair: A final comment from you, Jo.

Jo Grady: Very quickly. I do think that access and participation for both FE and HE has been an issue during this pandemic. I mentioned earlier about staff not having adequate access to technology but remote participation, who has the space, who has the room to learn, who has the technology to learn. I would anticipate that might trickle through further. That is something that institutions need to ensure they are addressing.

Q62 **Chair:** Thank you very much, all of you. We have finished a tiny bit ahead of time. I thank all the lecturers at your university, teachers, staff and support staff for the work that they do. I hope that you will take on board the serious concerns of a number of members of the Committee about the Dave Miller incident. I also hope that the UCU understands the concern from the Jewish community about what has gone on and no doubt from Jewish members of your union. Thank you.

Examination of witness

Witness: Michelle Donelan.

Q63 **Chair:** Good morning. Nice to see you and congratulations on your promotion to attending Cabinet. We are going to try to finish on the dot of 11.30, give or take one minute or so. Can you introduce yourself to the members of the public who are watching today?

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

Q64 **Chair:** Because you are covering both skills and universities, could you tell the Committee what your three priorities are?

Michelle Donelan: Overall, my role highlights just what focus this Government are placing on skills. That is my overarching priority. That is how we will deliver on our plan for growth, for jobs, and get to a high-productivity, high-wage economy.

My second focus is the students—both in further education and higher education—to ensure they are getting the quality of education that they deserve, which we would all want for our own children, and that they are getting good outcomes as well. They are getting into jobs. Also, value for money for the taxpayer and the students.

Q65 **Chair:** Jobs and value for money; that sounds like some good priorities. If I ask you briefly about free speech: will universities in breach of the law be fined or receive other financial penalties as a means of ensuring strict compliance?



Michelle Donelan: We are processing the legislation through Parliament. After that there will be comprehensive guidance produced by the new director of the Office for Students. If a university is in breach it will depend on an escalation via the director. It might be, but it is a very minor breach and a warning and advice can suffice. Or it could be a fine. Or, in a worst-case scenario, say they were a repeat offender or it is grossly negligent, they could lose their registration conditions. This will have teeth.

Q66 **Chair:** If there was any legal action, and you will probably be aware that one of our colleagues, Dr Julian Lewis, has tabled a question to the Department for Education. He sent it to me. If there is any court action who will be paying the costs of the court action? Will that be the education establishment and the student unions that may have been found not to uphold the law in terms of freedom of speech? Or will it be borne on the cost of the individual who has taken that action?

Michelle Donelan: The Bill introduces two processes. One is to go via the director, which is the free option for academics, for visiting speakers, for students. Secondly, the Bill adds a statutory tort; so, the right to redress for the individual to go and take their case to court. For instance, if they have been expelled they may be eligible for compensation, which the court could then administer. That will not be the taxpayer that is paying. That would be the institution that was at fault that would have to stump up those costs.

Chair: If there is legal action in the courts that will be the universities or the institution, not the students or the individuals?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, should that be the finding of the court decision. Of course, not everybody will win when they go to court.

Q67 **Chair:** We discussed the Dave Miller case with Bristol University just now. Given that Universities UK have reported 123 incidents of anti-Semitism at UK universities in 2018-19, what is your assessment of the progress universities have made in combatting anti-Semitism? You said last time you came you were encouraging universities to sign up to the IHRA definition. How is that going?

Michelle Donelan: First, anti-Semitism is absolutely abhorrent and it is atrocious that in today's age we are even discussing this being a problem in our universities. While we have made progress there is still more progress to be made. I have discussed this at great length with the likes of the Union of Jewish Students. The David Miller case, in particular, is something the whole sector should learn from, including on the need for speeding up processes and investigations.

In terms of the progress we have made, just a year ago we only had about 25 universities that had signed up to the IHRA definition. It is now over 90. I believe it is even more than that but the OfS are going to be publishing a report on this very shortly with the exact figure of where we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have got to. But that is not the silver bullet. It is part of the solution. It needs to be embedded within the entire institution to fix these problems.

Q68 Chair: You are obviously aware of our report into disadvantages faced by white working-class boys and girls on free school meals. We know that, apart from Romany Gypsy children, in terms of going to university they are the lowest group that sadly go to university. Male white British free school meal pupils are among the least likely to progress to higher tariff, higher education by age 19 in 2019-20. The progression rate of 5% is less than half the overall national figure of 10.9%. First, what will you do about it and how will you hold the providers to account to make sure that more white working class pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds go to university?

Michelle Donelan: I want to thank the Committee for shining a spotlight on this issue. We responded to your report and we have accepted most of the recommendations. If you look at the statistics, if white working-class male children do get, in particular, to university they do well when they are at university. They outperform a number of ethnic groups. The key is getting them there and giving them the aspirations.

Q69 Chair: Those on free school meals drop out much more. They do not go to the Russell Group of universities.

Michelle Donelan: The key thing we do need to focus on is getting them there as well. We are doing that through a variety of means. We are appointing a new director of access and participation, to focus on some of these issues. We have asked the OfS to focus on this issue in particular. That was in the previous Secretary of State's direction letter.

Q70 Chair: Having a director, what substantively will be done?

Michelle Donelan: Some of the individual things we are doing is making sure that we are beefing up the Baker clause, which is currently in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, to ensure that there is more access and information going to students. We are investing more in our National Careers Service. We are working with teachers to empower and encourage them to enable students to go and get on. We are working with universities to do more in the space of lifting up standards in schools.

There are some excellent examples of that: Sheffield Hallam is doing an excellent job. Universities leading the way with our maths schools as well do a great job. There is much more that we can do to combine the two sectors to ensure that those groups that you have identified do have the opportunities available to others.

Q71 Chair: I will pass on to Kim in a second and then to Nicola. Are you still responsible for opportunity areas?

Michelle Donelan: No.

Chair: Who is the Minister responsible for that?



Michelle Donelan: Will Quince.

Q72 **Kim Johnson:** The Chair has just mentioned about 123 cases of anti-Semitism. Were you aware of the number of cases of anti-black racism and Islamophobia that is reported nationally from universities and what action has been taken to respond to those issues?

Michelle Donelan: Any form of racism or abuse of that nature should not be tolerated on our universities. We have been very clear about that. Our universities have duties under a legislation, including the Equality Act to maintain. We continue to have those conversations with our universities because everybody should feel welcome in a university environment and be able to thrive and go on to succeed.

Q73 **Kim Johnson:** It is a well-known fact there are significant racial disparities between black and white students. I would be interested to know what action you are taking to try to reduce those disparities.

Michelle Donelan: I regularly talk to universities. If ever I read a particular incident, even in a newspaper, I directly call that vice-chancellor immediately to find out the facts versus the media reporting. To discuss with them what actions they are taking on that individual problem, to be reassured myself that the University is taking that seriously. I will continue to do that.

Q74 **Nicola Richards:** I know you visited Dudley recently and will have spoken to Andy Street. He has probably already raised with you some of the concerns the combined authority have around the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. The combined authority in the West Midlands have done a good job at seeing where the skills gaps are and therefore knowing where to ask for funding or get funding through the town fund. For example, we have money going into Sandwell Engineering College to enable us to close that skills gap locally.

That information has come from the combined authority working with local employers. The Bill could potentially stop that locally from working as well by removing the need for the combined authority to play their part. Do you think that local directly elected people, like regional mayors, should maintain that kind of influence?

Michelle Donelan: I am completely in favour of devolution and giving local people a say and a stake in their communities. It is a much better place to identify some of these skills gaps than we are here in Westminster. We definitely want them to be an integral part of that conversation and part of the skills plans that are formulated. What I will be doing is calling a regular round table with those bodies, to ensure that they have a voice directly to me and we can work better together to address some of these problems. I did speak to Andy Street whose enthusiasm, as ever, shone through

Q75 **Christian Wakeford:** You mentioned the Baker clause in your opening comments. Obviously, we have discussed it many times in this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Committee. We completely agree it does need strengthening.

Chair: When you were a member of the Committee.

Christian Wakeford: To what extent do you think it fully needs factoring into future Ofsted inspections as well, to make sure that there is a statutory duty for careers guidance, whether that is the armed forces, apprenticeships, T-Levels, and so on, is being given to our children in schools?

Chair: We argued in our report on white working-class disadvantaged, unless the Baker clause had been done properly, Ofsted should not give a good or outstanding recommendation to the school.

Michelle Donelan: There are three things that need to be done. We need to beef up the Baker clause. At the moment it does not explicitly say how many times a school has to give access and we are forwarding a beefed-up version through the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill.

Secondly, we do need to engage Ofsted and the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill allows us to do that. It does not go as far as the Committee might have hoped. It does ensure that it is an assessment criteria and a spotlight will be shone on this. Thirdly, we need to empower our teachers as well and give them the information and the tools to flag up these opportunities.

The further education landscape can be quite confusing. We have T-Levels, bootcamps, apprenticeships, degree apprenticeships, as well as the HE opportunities. We need to be ensuring that teachers are given all the information to then engage with children in their schools to show them those opportunities available. That is something I am spearheading at the moment.

Q76 **Christian Wakeford:** One quick follow-up in regards to T-Levels, and I declare an interest as chairman for APPG on T-Levels. Speaking to a lot of my local colleges, there is concern that, as T-Levels are rightfully being expanded and more money is going into them—and I applaud that—unfortunately we will see a negative impact on some of those BTEC qualifications, where the student might not necessarily be at a T-Level standard. Where do you see the Department moving forward in regards to BTEC? Will there still be a future for them?

Michelle Donelan: I would like to bust a myth here because the media has sold a story that we are abolishing all BTECs and there will be a binary choice between A-levels and T-Levels, which is certainly not the direction of travel. We know that many BTECs produce excellent outcomes for young people and for people later on in life. However, there have been various studies, including the welfare review, which showed that some of them are not of a good enough quality; the quality that we would want our own children or our own constituents to be taking. It is right that we take stock of it and we review it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Also, as I said before, the FE landscape can be confusing. We have heard that message loud and clear from employers. As a Government, if we keep adding in extra stuff it makes it even more confusing for employers, for parents, for teachers. We want to simplify it so that everybody can gain from the system. There will be no gaps for individuals in terms of certain pathways.

Q77 Tom Hunt: I welcome the strong focus on skills. It is absolutely critical to levelling up. We have a lot of job opportunities around Ipswich coming online. We have 10,000 manufacturing jobs hopefully associated with Freeport in Felixstowe. We were a bit disappointed because Norfolk and Suffolk put in a bid to be a pilot for the skills improvement plans, which are a great idea. I don't know why there needs to be pilots because it is an obvious thing to do. It gives business a role in shaping curriculum. When can Ipswich and Suffolk benefit from those? How long will the pilots take to run through? Because the pilots will tell us what we already know; it is the right thing to do.

Secondly, adult education. I know our education budget has been devolved to mayoral and combined authorities. Suffolk does not have a directly elected mayor, and is probably unlikely to ever have one, but I do not see why we should not benefit from the adult education budget being devolved to our area as well. That would further enable us to link up job opportunities with people skills.

Chair: That is a prebudget bid for Ipswich.

Michelle Donelan: We will have to wait for a few hours. I will not take the thunder away from the Chancellor in terms of the local skills plan and the direction of travel. We wanted to pilot it to get it right. These are revolutionary. They are bringing together business and fostering that coherent relationship between them and colleges in some areas where it has been good but in other areas where it has not been as good. It is a learning curve but our ultimate goal of course is for every area to have them, including Ipswich.

Q78 Tom Hunt: Levelling up is the key thing at the moment. Skills is a key thing for levelling up. I am confident the Government are very much of a view that levelling up is about the whole country. There are areas in East Anglia that are very deprived. If Suffolk had been a pilot for the skills improvement plan it would have been an increased recognition that we are part of levelling up as well.

Chair: Is there not a way you can get the Chancellor to add a line?

Michelle Donelan: Wiltshire is not an area either and it would not be a pilot if every area was in. On the adult education budget, you are right; 60% of it is devolved. It is something that we can consistently keep under review but one of the key things that we are doing is bringing together everybody through a variety of our reforms, including the business community. If you look at T-Levels co-founded by 250 employers, if you look at apprenticeships written with employers,



everything is designed to ensure that the outcomes are there and that line of sight is there for the individual to get a job.

- Q79 **Tom Hunt:** Finally, linked to what was mentioned earlier about the white working-class report and only 12% of white working-class boys end up in university. Clearly this is worrying. Is your sense that you have to strike the right balance between looking into why that is the case but, also, recognising that often university is not the best thing and the right thing for some of them. We would not want to address this by a headlong rush, get that cohort into universities anywhere, whatever type of university.

Michelle Donelan: I don't think we would want to be sending out a message that university is the gold standard for everybody and it will lead everybody to where they want to go because it certainly is not. For anybody, no matter their background, it might be that doing an apprenticeship or a degree apprenticeship or another further education course would get them where they want to get and faster.

If you look at level 4, 5 apprentices, five years later they are earning more than graduates, which is quite a stark figure. You are right. What we should be doing though is removing all the barriers. If there is a student from a white working-class background that has the desire and the potential to go to university they should be able to do that. No barrier should be in their place. Equally they should know the full suite of options available to them.

- Q80 **Tom Hunt:** Clearly, in terms of a skills agenda, university will be part of that.

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely, an instrumental part.

Tom Hunt: Are there examples of universities not always totally buying in to the agenda and if so, in future, are there any tools the Government may have at their disposal to try to get them to up their game?

Michelle Donelan: There is more work for us to do to ensure that every university is working closer with their local and national business community. Certainly, there is more work to be done and that is a goal across our education system, so that we are producing those outcomes. They are an instrumental part of our skills agenda. We have some of the world's best universities here.

- Q81 **Chair:** Why not rocket-boost degree apprenticeships, because the universities we have just had said that bureaucracy is still appalling and there are issues with end-point assessments? Why not put funding and targets towards having 50% of students doing degree apprenticeships. That would certainly help those from disadvantaged backgrounds because they would not have to worry about taking on a loan as well. They would be having some university experience but would be getting skilled jobs with good pay at the end.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Michelle Donelan: I share your passion on degree apprenticeships. We have come a long way but there is a long way to go. If we look at the stats, degree apprenticeships increased by 80% despite the pandemic. They were available in four universities in the last four years, but it is not good enough. I want every university to be holding degree apprenticeships, not one or two.

Q82 **Chair:** Why not say that universities will not get funding unless they have degree apprenticeships?

Michelle Donelan: We are doing a couple of things. IfATE have done a consultation on this to try to remove some of that bureaucracy that was talked about and those barriers.

Chair: They have been saying that for the last three years.

Michelle Donelan: No, they have just done the consultation.

Chair: I know, but every time I have ever spoken to them they have said—

Michelle Donelan: I was not in post then. The other thing that we are doing is looking at how we can incentivise universities—so a carrot and stick approach—and then also removing the barriers. It is not just about the supply. It is also about the demand, which goes back to our point before about empowering teachers to have all the information and ensuring that there is access in our schools for those options available. I was speaking to a group of apprentices the other day—

Q83 **Chair:** Why not reform the levy so that if companies hire higher level apprentices, but only in the skills that the country needs because, at the end of the day, this is a Government strategic priority. They have more financial incentive as well as the universities to have more degree apprentices or higher apprentices.

Michelle Donelan: With the levy we do need to be supporting those at lower-level apprenticeships as well. That is not necessarily the answer. There are a number of things we can do like incentivise universities, removing the barriers, but also fertilising the demand and ensuring that that access in schools is there.

I was going to say that I met a group of apprentices the other day and not one of them had been encouraged to go on and do a degree apprenticeship by their teachers. Not one of them had heard about them in their school. Some of them had been encouraged not to, and to go to university. That is why we need to be giving that information to our teachers.

Chair: When you say “incentivise universities”, what does that mean in practice?

Michelle Donelan: I do not want to pre-empt anything that we might be announcing but I am taking this very seriously.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Are you talking about financial incentives?

Michelle Donelan: I am looking at that.

Chair: A genuine looking, not a Civil Service—

Michelle Donelan: A genuine looking.

Chair: Not a Sir Humphrey looking at.

Michelle Donelan: I am not in the Civil Service.

Q84 **Chair:** Just about online learning. The survey suggest that the universities are doing the bulk of it on online learning; what is your view about this? Do you think this is unacceptable or not?

Michelle Donelan: There has been some misreporting by the media. The media would make you believe that the vast majority of universities are completely online, which is not the case.

Q85 **Chair:** The Times Higher Education said that two-thirds of higher education providers said that most lectures would remain online.

Michelle Donelan: That is lectures, not overall. Our position on this is we have been very clear. All restrictions have been removed from a government perspective. Universities are free to teach everything face to face, including lectures. No university should be restricting their face-to-face provision based on Covid. That is certainly not our guidance. Online can enhance learning. We do know that. There are some excellent examples; Imperial do virtual labs. They can supplement learning. When that takes place I welcome and applaud it.

Also, we know that in some universities students have asked for this. If you look at Warwick, for example, for seven years their student union ran a campaign for lectures to go online because they are more accessible, you can rewind them, you can rewatch them, and so on. In those scenarios, again I endorse it. Online should never be used as a cost-cutting exercise or to devalue education or take away from it. We are very clear on that. I am writing to vice-chancellors this week once again on this matter to reinforce our message on it.

Q86 **Chair:** We already have a Rolls Royce online university, which is The Open University. and students pay less for that. They do not have to pay £9,000 and it is an incredibly land of opportunity for disadvantaged students. If universities are doing a significant amount online still should students get a discount?

Michelle Donelan: As I said, online is sometimes something that the students have asked for.

Chair: You know what we are talking about here.

Michelle Donelan: Yes. It is up to the university to produce their product and then ensure that students are happy with that. If the student is not happy with that then what I would say to them is do make a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

complaint. They do have consumer rights. Cross-reference what they were promised versus what they have. If they are still not satisfied with the complaint they can take it to the OIA. We know that over £400,000 in the last year has been given out by the OIA back to students.

Q87 **Chair:** Can you explain the OIA for those watching?

Michelle Donelan: The Office of Independent Adjudicator, sorry. Slipped into politician jargon. The point I was trying to make is that the students are consumers. They do have rights. They should be getting what they have been informed they were going to get. It is not as simple as saying online is bad, face to face is good, because in some scenarios it can add but it should never be used as a cost-cutting exercise.

Q88 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I am very reassured by what the Minister said certainly about getting students back. With the last panel we were talking a lot about the mental health effect as well. Just in terms of that, is that something that the Government have considered with the guidance that we have given to the universities?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, mental health of students is something that has been particularly on my mind throughout the pandemic. I made sure that I have worked with the sector to ensure that they have prioritised mental health. That they moved that online straightaway, as they did online teaching, and they viewed it as a priority at the same level.

We also worked with the Office for Students to ensure that £50 million has now been dedicated in the strategic priorities grant to help with the transition. We know that transitioning from A-level or vocational qualifications could be quite hard in a normal year, then you add on the pandemic. We worked with the Office for Students to have a student space set up; an online platform to supplement mental health of £3 million.

I agree, getting students back into the classroom, getting them back on to campus, having that broader student experience, is fundamental to supporting not only their mental health, their wellbeing and welfare, but also having a great university experience.

Q89 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** You said that students and value for money are two of your main priorities. What information is and should be available for students so they can work out whether their course is value for money. They may be studying for a particular degree for a particular job or because of a particular interest. If they are doing it simply to try to get a better paid job at the end of it, you have said already that for many of them they could have got a higher paid job had they done an apprenticeship instead. What information is available and will you be making more information available on outcomes and courses.

Michelle Donelan: This is something that I am confident we will be working further on with the new director for access and participation. I want students to have as much information as possible at their fingertips



when they are making these decisions that will impact on the rest of their lives. We have already enhanced the information available by my predecessors to students, but there is more to do. The Office for Students have been working on a dataset called Proceed, which shows those that continue and then the outcomes combined.

That dataset can be a very powerful source of information for students. There is much more that we can do to ensure that every student is seeing that information when they make those decisions and knowing how to interpret that information as well.

- Q90 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** The other question is related to value for money for the taxpayer, which is obviously important particularly on Budget day. The House of Commons library says that £141 billion is what the outstanding student loans debt stood at in March this year. It is predicted by the middle of this century it will go up to £560 billion. Only a quarter of graduates, according to the same briefing, will pay their debt in full. It looks like around a third will not pay anything at all. Is that good value for money for the state?

Michelle Donelan: There are certainly questions to ask about whether that is value for money for the state. If those students are not going on to get graduate jobs one has to question whether it would have been better if they had studied something else or they had done a different type of course. Some of the questions that we have been asking ourselves, and we have been looking at, as we prepare our response to Augar, which will be available shortly for you to—

Chair: How shortly?

Michelle Donelan: “Shortly” means very soon.

Chair: Before the end of the year?

Michelle Donelan: I will not commit to an exact month because I am wise enough, and have been in politics long enough, to know never commit yourself too tightly to a timeframe, but I would say very shortly.

- Q91 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Is it a good investment for the state to be investing in degrees; people spending time studying if they are going to end up doing jobs that are not graduate jobs? Not just for the person themselves but for the state because had they not done that course they would have been presumably working in one of many vacancies that are out there at the moment and paying taxes instead of accumulating debt for the Government.

Michelle Donelan: We need to do more to make sure that all courses are of a high quality and lead to good outcomes. When we say “good outcomes”, we mean jobs that are graduate jobs that an individual would not have got had they not done that degree. Absolutely, there is a lot more work to do. You will see, when we were responding to Augar, that a number of our policies are directed at trying to address this issue.



Q92 Apsana Begum: I want to begin by asking you a few questions around the impact of the pandemic on the sector. First—and I appreciate you have been in your role for a short time—but what steps is the Department taking to support the health and wellbeing of students and staff, in particular, to support and challenge providers to take positive action on mental health?

Michelle Donelan: Further to what I was saying before, we have done a great deal of work on mental health because it has been one of my priorities throughout the pandemic, given all that students have been through and the unprecedented time, and at times being locked down away from their family. We have added £15 million to ensure that we can help support them with transition money for mental health. We still have the student space online platform running at £3 million.

I co-chaired a mental health taskforce, with the previous Minister for Children and Families, to ensure that we were supporting individuals on their mental health right the way through from early years all the way to universities. We will continue to shine a spotlight on this issue as we know that the pandemic is certainly not finished.

Apsana Begum: Could you explain the transition money; that was quite technical?

Michelle Donelan: That is a £15 million pot that is allocated within the strategic priorities grant, which is the former T grant. That will be used for universities to add additional support in the transition of students starting this year fundamentally who have been through a great deal, have not sat exams for instance, been out of school for long periods of time now going to university when we know it is much more independent study, they will be living away from home. Having been through the pandemic that is a bigger change than normally they would experience. It is something that I wanted to particularly put a lens focus on.

Q93 Apsana Begum: How will the Department be challenging providers that do not take positive action on mental health?

Michelle Donelan: We have been working very closely with UUK, who is the largest sector representative body on this. There are various initiatives that the sector have spearheaded themselves on it, from a thing called step-change and embedding mental health within all of their policies and everything they do.

It is not just about having one individual at university that talks about mental health. It is about making sure that in every single decision a university makes, be that the assessments that they sit or the timing or the way that they teach, that they are considering mental health. That is proving to have an impact. I know the OfS and I will continue to monitor the situation with universities on this topic.

Q94 Apsana Begum: What is your assessment of the impact of this year's results on applications to higher education and how it has affected the



sector?

Michelle Donelan: We have record numbers of disadvantaged students going to university this year. In fact, a disadvantaged student is 80% more likely to be able to go than they were 10 years ago. We have record numbers of students going to university and we have record numbers of students taking courses, like medicine and STEM, which we particularly need for our economy.

Q95 **Chair:** It is true what you said, but we know that many disadvantaged students drop out of university and they do not go to the higher-ranking universities either. Part-time students have collapsed.

Michelle Donelan: Absolutely. Completion rate is something that I have been particularly drilling down in my time as Minister, and we will be doing even more so over the coming year. I agree with you, real social mobility is not just getting somebody to the door of an apprenticeship or university or a T-Level. It is getting them to complete it and get that qualification that can then unlock the next door in their lives. That is spot on and exactly what we want to be doing a lens focus on.

Q96 **Apsana Begum:** There are many courses that are being oversubscribed with the increase in applications and increase of ordering of higher grades. Health-related courses are facing particular difficulties and obviously some institutions are offering students incentives. What is your assessment of the situation?

Michelle Donelan: I worked very hard over the summer to ensure that we could get students into university this year, so that they did not have to put their lives on hold after the very difficult and challenging two years that we have had. Universities worked with me to enable that. We got them into their courses. The number that deferred has only marginally gone up.

In medicine, we actively created a brokerage scheme to enable students that wanted to go this year, if theirs was over, they could move across. We increased the cap as well. We did everything we possibly could to ensure that students could get in this year and start their course. That has been very successful. I thank all of the universities for working with me on that.

Apsana Begum: Particularly on health-related courses, where we are seeing there are institutions that are offering incentives, we are seeing those courses in particular not being subscribed to.

Michelle Donelan: That is not factually correct because we increased the cap available to universities to take more medical students, so more went this time. We also created a brokerage scheme, which enabled students to swap the university that they were going to go to, and they got a financial incentive paid for by the institution that they were originally going to go to. We have seen some defer. We see medical students defer every year; that is standard practice. We have seen



HOUSE OF COMMONS

slightly more defer but I would not say it is a problem, as you have outlined.

Q97 **Apsana Begum:** With widening participation, how is the Department working with providers to address enduring gaps in access and participation for disadvantaged students?

Michelle Donelan: Every university has to have an access and participation plan to be an Office for Students registered provider to charge higher fees. We are currently appointing a new access and participation director. This is an opportunity for us to look at some of the things that the Committee have raised, put a particular focus on things like completion rates. We will be seeing more on this work over the coming months.

Q98 **Apsana Begum:** In terms of measures that indicate disparities in outcomes for students from ethnic minority backgrounds, in particular, how is the Department working with the Office for Students and the sector to address these disparities?

Michelle Donelan: Again, a lot of this is in the access and participation plans that universities have. We have been attacking and dealing with some of these disparities to ensure that the opportunities are there and available for students of all backgrounds. That is something that we will continue to focus on and I hope that the next time I come back to the Committee we have made even more progress on this.

Q99 **Apsana Begum:** In the earlier session we had before, we spoke to vice-chancellors and representatives from the University and College Union. Widening participation is one angle in one area to try to improve graduate outcomes and to deal with the disparities that ethnic minority students face.

On the other end, we know in the UK the number of British black professors is below 1%, and that has been fairly consistent for five years. Personally, I think that is one of the most shameful statistics in the country. On the other end, in terms of senior management and senior leaderships of universities, what do you think needs to be done to address ethnicity pay gaps and racial disparities at senior management level?

Michelle Donelan: It is about looking at the pipeline as well, and the stuff we have already talked about. Making sure that students from ethnic backgrounds are going on to do degrees, to Masters, to PhDs, to then become lecturers in the first place. Obviously, ensuring that our universities have a culture of openness and inclusivity to then encourage those people to go on and be lecturers. That is part of the work that I do, to ensure that we are: first, providing the pipeline and, secondly, making sure that our universities are representative of society.

Q100 **Apsana Begum:** It is also the attrition points, usually for ethnic minority groups, once they graduate. In terms of employment, of course, but also



in academia and further study. Is there work being done by the Department to address that particular point in terms of graduation?

Michelle Donelan: We have done a number of things, including Masters loans to ensure that people have the financial ability to go on and do further study. Universities are independent and responsible for their own recruitment. It is very different to some of the other levers that we have at our fingertips for other areas of education. I agree with you. I want it to be much easier to get into academia and much more open if we also look at other groups, like care leavers. A very small proportion of academics are care leavers. There is much more work to do on this.

Q101 **Christian Wakeford:** You mentioned about record numbers of students now going to universities and there being concern about dropouts. One thing we have been made aware from colleges, employers, and so on, with some of the teacher-assessed grades those students are not necessarily at the level they thought they would be. What extra support is going in to universities and, more importantly, to students to allow for that catch-up during transition to make sure that they can hit the ground running and that they are not dropping out to ultimately affect social mobility?

Michelle Donelan: We did hear this worry last year and there was some doom and gloom that we will see mass amounts of students drop out, and we did not see that. I am confident that universities will continue to wrap their arms around these students and provide them the support that is needed both on the mental health, the wellbeing and the transition, but also the academic support to catch up if needed in certain areas. I have held various meetings with the sector bodies on this very topic and it is something that I know they are taking very seriously.

Q102 **Tom Hunt:** It was touched upon earlier, but how do you respond to concerns the Government's proposed changes to level 3 qualifications may disproportionately affect disadvantaged students, students with SEND and students from ethnic minorities?

Michelle Donelan: The reforms that we are introducing, including the rollout of T-Levels, is to help students from all backgrounds—including disadvantaged students—because everybody should be going on to a quality course that has a line of sight of a job and will that good outcome. There will be a massive benefit for those students. We also have the transition year to help support those that are not ready for a T-Level yet. But, as I said before, we are not abolishing all BTECs. There will not be a gap for those individuals that want to do certain pathways. But what we have to do is make sure that we have not made the landscape even more confusing for employers, parents and students when they are making those decisions.

When we look at countries like Germany or Scandinavia, and countries that are leading the way in vocational training, they have a much tighter



HOUSE OF COMMONS

list of courses than ours, which is ballooning, so it is important that we take stock.

Q103 **Tom Hunt:** Back to the free speech Bill. I am very concerned by some of the stuff I see going on in our universities. We have obviously had the harassment of a professor at the University of Sussex where it is questionable whether her union were effective in standing up for her.

Michelle Donelan: I am not sure it is questionable. They did not.

Tom Hunt: We have had this sort of drama at University of Cambridge recently where the vice-chancellor resigned following a ballot on the new microaggression complaints procedure, which I personally feel could have had impacts for free speech. Is the Government open to maybe going further on the free speech Bill if it comes to a conclusion that perhaps it does not go far enough?

Michelle Donelan: I think it does go far enough. It is quite radical in its nature because we need a solution that will deal with the problem we have. It was disappointing when this was in the House for Second Reading that the Opposition denied there was a problem. I do not think anybody can now deny there is a problem looking at what has happened to Professor Stock in Sussex. We cannot allow this to continue on our campuses.

Our universities should be breeding grounds for thought, innovation, challenge; that is how we will produce the next generation that will be leading the way in different sectors. That is how we will protect our international reputation of our world-class universities.

Q104 **Tom Hunt:** Don't you think it is quite telling that, with regards to the situation at the University of Cambridge, they struggled to get the signatures to trigger the ballot because I think they were publicly known? Once we had the secret vote, there was significant support and opposition to a vice-chancellor looking to do.

Michelle Donelan: It speaks volumes to the chilling effect that is happening in our universities up and down the country. It is something that we are addressing with our free speech Bill, which honours our manifesto, will have real teeth and ensure that not only is free speech protected but also promoted in our campuses.

Q105 **Chair:** We were talking about completion. You said you were looking at that. What does that mean in substance? I quoted you some figures about white working-class disadvantaged and I also mentioned to you about part-time students. What are you doing substantively to reverse the huge decline in part-time students? At the moment, it often sounds like the old tractor production in the Soviet Union is up by 50% this year but we do not make any hay, there is no food in the shops.

When you say we have more disadvantaged pupils going to university it sounds a bit like that because we know, as I mentioned earlier, that the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

story of disadvantaged students is not great in too many cases. Poor completion, not going to the higher-ranking universities, and a decline in part-time students. What are you doing substantively apart from just saying you are looking at this?

Michelle Donelan: I want the Committee to be under no illusion that I am doing much more than just looking at it. The first time that I ever came to the Select Committee I was trying to make this point that real social mobility is not just getting a student into the door and we cannot just look at those stats.

Chair: What are you doing substantively?

Michelle Donelan: We are appointing a new director of access and participation. We will have a complete focus on this and somebody in the OfS that will be responsible for drilling down on these completion rates. It is something that I have been speaking to numerous universities on. I have made it very clear that this Government stands for real social mobility, which is, as I have said, not just getting them into the door. It is getting them completed and getting them into a good outcome. It is more than just a completion rate. It is on the right courses as well.

Q106 **Chair:** What substantively will you do to make sure these universities change?

Michelle Donelan: That will be in our response to Augar as well. As you are trying to tempt me to reveal things I am not in a position to reveal, I just say wait a little bit longer, if you possibly can, and you will hear.

Q107 **Chair:** Can you at least say there will be a serious substantive response on the issues that we have raised?

Michelle Donelan: What we will be doing, via our response to Augar, is trying to tackle quality, trying to ensure that the university experience leads to a good outcome. This is not just about universities as well. It is also about what we are doing with our skills agenda with further education, with apprenticeships. Making sure that students do not feel compelled to have to go to university because some of these students that will be dropping out will be students that would have been better placed going and doing an apprenticeship or another qualification.

Q108 **Chair:** The point I am trying to make is it is just frustrating when we always say it is more disadvantaged people going to university when we know the outcomes are not great and they are not always going to higher-ranking universities. We need to be very clear what we will do to help that.

Michelle Donelan: I don't think I have ever said I want more disadvantaged students to go to university. I have said that I want more disadvantaged students to be able to have the opportunity to go to university if they want to.

Q109 **Chair:** What will you do to reverse the decline in part-time students?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

They tend to be more mature and more reluctant to take out loans.

Michelle Donelan: We revolutionising our education system, which I am particularly excited about, with our lifelong learning entitlement, which will be introduced via the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, which will mean that individuals can then take modules as opposed to a three-year degree.

They might do that at 18 or they might do that later on in life and it will open up higher education and higher technical qualifications to a whole cohort of society that thought that that was not even possible for them. That will be introduced in 2025. We are piloting it before. That will be an opportunity for so many individuals to take shorter courses, which then propel them on to that next stage in their career.

Chair: Those modules will obviously be able to count towards university degrees?

Michelle Donelan: They will adopt to a degree but some might never do a full degree because they might only need bite-sized chunks. Not everybody needs three years in a certain qualification for what they want to get.

Q110 **Chair:** I am very supportive of that and I look forward to it coming to the House of Commons. Final question before I pass to Kim. Going back to the free speech issue. I asked you about funding. If an individual feels that a university is not following the free speech laws that you are introducing, if that individual feels that he or she has to go to court. If he has to fund that he will never be able to do it because that individual will not have the funds. What I am trying to understand is what support will be given to individuals so that they do not have any costs in a serious way that the free speech law introduced by the Government is not being adhered to.

Michelle Donelan: That is why we are introducing the process where they can go to the director, which will be the free route. That will be the main route.

The new director that will sit on the board of the Office for Students will be the director for free speech and academic freedom. They will go to them. They will investigate the situation and they will have the powers to fine the university, to remove the registration condition from the university, but it is right that we have a statutory law introduced as well so that that option is available. The main option will be the free option that people engage with, with the director. The director will be a one stop shop for students, for academics and for visiting speakers.

Chair: There is no cost.

Michelle Donelan: No cost, completely free.

Chair: That is very helpful.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q111 **Kim Johnson:** It is a sad indictment that so many disadvantaged kids end up at fee colleges without basic maths and English. I know, from speaking to the principal of my FE college, they have to spend enormous amounts of money to bring them up to scratch, to enable them to move on to higher courses. Are there any opportunities to look at the funding to FE college so they are on parity with other education sectors?

Michelle Donelan: Once again you will have to wait for the Budget and the Spending Review, which is literally a couple of hours away, to see what is available. I think you will be pleasantly surprised and welcome what is announced today.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am very excited about the skills announcements that somehow found their way into the newspapers today and the other things. I am very encouraged by that and I look forward to the Bill coming through the House of Commons. I wish you all luck in your new position as well.