

## Education Committee

### Oral evidence: [The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services](#), HC 254

Monday 18 May 2020

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

Questions 205 - 284

#### Witnesses

[I:](#) Zamzam Ibrahim, National President, National Union of Students, Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union, and Professor Debra Humphris, Chair, University Alliance.

[II:](#) Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive, and Sir Michael Barber, Chair, Office for Students.

Written evidence from witnesses:



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Zamzam Ibrahim, Dr Jo Grady and Professor Debra Humphris.

Q205 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Education Committee's virtual session. Today the Committee is hearing evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education. The focus of today's session is on students. We have two panels this morning. The first panel consists of representatives from the NUS, the University Alliance and the University and College Union. Joining us for the second panel is the Office for Students. Thank you very much for coming and, for the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliamentlive.tv, could you kindly introduce yourselves and your job titles, please?

**Professor Humphris:** I am Professor Debra Humphris. I am the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Brighton, and I am here as the Chair of the University Alliance.

**Dr Grady:** I am Dr Jo Grady. I am General Secretary of the University and College Union.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** I am Zamzam Ibrahim. I am the National President of NUS: the National Union of Students.

Q206 **Chair:** Thank you. Could I begin by asking you to set the scene as to what you think is going on in terms of higher education, students and the profession with the coronavirus, and what are the greatest challenges that you see?

**Professor Humphris:** Shall I start?

**Chair:** Please, whoever wants to start first.

**Professor Humphris:** Thank you, Chair. As the Chair of the University Alliance, representing 11 universities across the UK, which is at the heart of our cities and regions, we deliver education that is based predominantly on the workforce for today and tomorrow to give high-quality practice based learning and applied research.

I am deeply proud of all of our members, our students and our staff who are at the moment making extraordinary contributions to help the country deal with the challenge of Covid-19. Whether it is our nurses going into practice supporting staff, Nightingale hospitals, or PPE, there is a whole range of ways in which we are—as students and staff—making a contribution to our nation.

The challenges going ahead are many. My concern is around how we continue to support our students in their learning and the changes and adaptations we have to make, how we support our staff in that process of adaptation, and how we prepare for the coming year.



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Across the alliance, we will look at multiple ways in which to enable practice-based learning. Whether that is the studio, the laboratory, the clinical placement, or clinical skills, we have to look at creative ways to adapt that to ensure that we are continuing to keep our supply line of students coming through and going on to be graduates to work in a whole range of professions across society.

We will also play a crucial role and want to play a crucial role in the economic and social recovery of the country, as we will need to see retraining, reskilling, economic development supporting SMEs and businesses in society to recover from what is an extraordinary global pandemic.

The University Alliance members—11 of us together—stand ready to do all that we can within what will be really financially challenging, extraordinary circumstances, the like of which we really will not know until we get past recruitment in September.

**Chair:** Is it okay to call you by your first names? I should have asked you first.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Yes, that is fine.

**Chair:** Thank you. Zamzam, would you like to go next, please?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Yes, absolutely. To set the scene from the students' perspective, since the shutdown of campuses after Covid-19 we saw that students have had a huge loss of income, first of all, which has been the main concern for a lot of students. So, as the National Union of Students, we did a survey and the biggest concern during this crisis was financial concerns—financial issues.

One of the things that we campaigned for and have pushed for was for students to have hardship grants. We recognise that the bail-out did include that, but I think it tackled one issue but exacerbated another in terms of obtaining funding from widening participation.

That is one main concern—finances—for a lot of young people. They worry about being able to keep a roof over their head and, as many of you probably already know, students do not qualify for any other state benefits, like universal credit, if they do have a loss of income. Therefore, a lot of young people are currently living on food banks to survive. To me, that is a huge concern first off.

Also, institutions have had to adapt very quickly to offer online learning. We spoke about this last week when I highlighted how institutions like the Open University have held online learning for years, and have perfected that, but now academics who have taught face to face their entire life have been expected to develop skills overnight, which their colleagues have probably developed over years, and to take that quality of the education that those students have paid for and those students



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deserve to be able to have the skills for them to go into the workforce and to turn that into an online source. There is no surprise that a lot of students have had issues with online learning. It is no surprise that a lot of students feel like the quality of education has gone down massively. That is no fault of the academics at all. I want to highlight that. It is incredibly important to highlight, but it is a concern that a lot of students are facing.

From our survey we found that over 20% of students are unable to access online sources, and those are concerns that essentially need to be tackled. There is a huge concern with students on the value of a degree once students leave university. We know thousands and thousands of students will be graduating this summer, going into a job market that is essentially non-existent. That is another concern that we have for students and how they are going to be affected. As Debra highlighted, essentially, to be able to get out of the recession that we are heading towards, we are going to have to invest in education because we are going to have to reskill and retrain a workforce to be able to handle the demand that is coming our way.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jo?

**Dr Grady:** Thanks. Good morning, everyone. From UCU's perspective I would like to stress that we are really concerned about the extent to which some stability needs to be brought to the sector for students, staff and the communities that they serve.

We asked Government for a much more substantial bail-out package and financial support during this period, and I will take some time, if that is okay, just to outline why. We know that Covid-19 has already had a dramatic effect on our education system. The London Economics report that we commissioned and then took some time to promote, demonstrated that we are looking at approximately a £2.5 billion shortfall in international student fees.

We are talking about the need for education to be central in the rebuilding of the economy and of retraining people. What we are already seeing, because those student numbers are declining—we have a survey ongoing at the minute, the results are not ready yet but they are strong indicators that international students are declining, cancelling or deferring their places.

What we are seeing at universities is staff are being laid off, contracts are not being continued, so the academic capacity, which needs to be there to ensure that the excellent research and teaching that we deliver from universities continues, is already being cut. Zamzam has just mentioned that actual distance learning is a skill. Open University and other universities that specialise in it hone these skills over years, if not decades. Lots of staff are moving mountains to get materials online, but it is going to be an "all hands on deck" situation. That means a proper underwriting of the sector to deliver that financial stability, which will not



see people having their jobs threatened now and being threatened with redundancy or already laid off, which is what we have seen.

We are expecting student numbers to drop by 230,000 for the academic year 2020-21. As I say, that is a loss of £2.5 billion in fee and teaching grant income, but what the report we commissioned projects is that that is likely more than £6 billion that the economy will lose. It is worth pointing out that some universities will be much harder hit by this than others. Some universities will be able to continue to attract domestic students in this period, but some will struggle.

We are concerned about the ongoing competition during this time that will continue among universities, because they want to keep their students happy, and we understand that. As people who deliver teaching, academics and the other types of staff that work in universities want to keep students happy, but what we are saying is that there is a pressure cooker environment essentially happening at the minute where people are losing their jobs, the people who remain are having incredibly intensified workloads trying to keep up with everything, trying to do their best to deliver pastoral and educational support to students, often with their own technology, based on their own broadband, from their own kitchens, while they are also having to deal with a pandemic. We would really like the Government not to just underwrite the sector more fully but also step in—I think this is a really important point so I will make it before I finish—with fuller guidance about what universities should do when we reopen.

In our opinion at UCU, universities were slower than they could have been to cease face-to-face teaching on campuses. The weekend before lockdown some universities were still conducting open days, or still had their libraries open. In any reopening of universities there needs to be much firmer Government guidance because, if not, I think some universities will rush to reopen. They will want to promise students that they will be reopening next semester, in order to attract those students rather than they go somewhere else.

If you think about university campuses, they are already normally quite cluttered from over-recruitment. Students go around from cafés to libraries to restaurants—everywhere, always rammed. Lecture theatres often hold 200 or 300 people. They are down a tiny corridor. At 10 to the hour there are people mixing. The idea that we can just leave what that guidance should look like to numerous different universities, when they are also in competition with each other to try to attract students, I think would be incredibly dangerous.

**Q207 Chair:** Very briefly, if I can ask you very gently to be as concise as possible because we have a lot of questions to get through. The Government have given an extensive package to higher education. Can I ask you, almost in a nutshell, what are the flaws in that package? Jo, do you want to start?



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**Dr Grady:** I will be concise. There are two main problems. One is it is more of an IOU. It is bringing forward money that the universities would have received. It is not a proper underwriting so it will not save the jobs now that are being lost. Also, the number cap is a misnomer. It will enable the wealthiest universities to substantially grow their domestic student base at the expense of other more locally focused institutions. These two things will continue the competition.

**Professor Humphris:** It is cash flow—existing money—being brought forward to early in the new year, so that is not any additional funding. It is just, as I say, cash flow. The point is well made. I would want to know the detail of how the mechanisms UCAS is going to deploy this summer to control clearing would be critical, because that is the moment at which we will work out what the true impact on universities will be.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** I echo what both have said. It is just solving a cash-flow issue. It has brought no new money into institutions. If anything, it is a short-term fix and is going to have a wider impact—I think a worse impact—in the long run.

Q208 **David Simmonds:** Good morning to you all. I have two questions that you have touched on a little bit, which concern the welfare, the wellbeing and health of students and then of staff. May I ask you to tell us, given the stress and the uncertainty which we have heard about, do you feel enough is being done to protect students' health and wellbeing, and then the same question in respect of staff and any additional measures you think that need to be taken by Government to protect the health and wellbeing of staff and students?

**Chair:** Zamzam, do you want to start first?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Absolutely. First of all, it is important to recognise that students, as well as the rest of the world, are going through a traumatic experience and, therefore, should have the option to either redo their year if they would like to or to have the ability to essentially be reimbursed or to have their tuition waived, simply for the fact that students are going through a very difficult time.

To understand, we know that mental health was a real issue on our campuses and, if anything, this is exacerbating that. With the pressures our institutions are facing to be able to deliver online learning, they are putting that same pressure on students to be able to submit assignments, to do exams in households, not recognising the issues and the concerns that those students might be facing.

I spoke to a student quite recently, who told me that she has two assignments deadlines to do. She is currently taking care of a family member who she is a carer to and, at the same time, has lost all her income and is still paying for accommodation in a hall that she is no longer living in. That is important to recognise. That is a young person who is facing economic pressures, who is a carer for a family member



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because they cannot get a carer right now, but at the same time is having to submit assignments and deadlines and work under pressure. She told me that she is working from her car. I think it is important to recognise that students are facing a very, very difficult time and, therefore, the Government need to recognise that to be able to support their institutions, so when we ask for a £6 million hardship grant that was for students to be supported to be able to pay for financial necessities, such as rent and food to eat.

To put it quite bluntly, this is essentially a feature of a generation who are currently struggling to eat and struggling to pay the basic necessities. It is quite worrying that we are—

Q209 **Chair:** Did the Government give a £48 million fund for hardship between April and May for students?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** That is essentially widening participation money that was transferred over, and I absolutely understand how that is a short-term fix, but it is important to recognise—I will give you an example, there was a Russell Group institution who, after opening their Covid-19 grant, gave out £220,000 to over 300 students in less than two weeks. That is essentially like a small picture of how students are affected and how there actually isn't enough to tackle the issue at hand.

**Chair:** If I can bring in the other witnesses.

**Dr Grady:** Shall I go first?

**Chair:** Please.

**Dr Grady:** I will cover staff and then I will go to students. From a staff perspective, we have been very concerned about the health and safety of staff. First of all, from a workload perspective, as I have said, because some staff have been cut already—they have lost their jobs—the workload that they would be doing, which at this time of year is marking a lot of the time, has gone on to people who are already overworked.

Lots of UCU members have reported—and this is completely understandable—that students are needing much more care and attention during this period, so that is another additional part of their workload. None of these things have been factored into how universities consider staff wellbeing when working from home. That is a real concern of ours.

Another concern, in terms of returning to work, is that we have made it clear that nobody should be going back to work until it is safe to do so and that nowhere should we open without a thorough health and safety risk assessment, and that this should be very extensive and cover things such as how you will commute to work, how BAME communities are particularly affected and so on—so not your kind of normal health and safety risk assessment. We were quite concerned how, as of Monday last week, it was decided that people who work in labs should be able to return to work, despite there being no guidance.



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In terms of students, again, some of the concerns that we have for our members obviously apply to students as well. Zamzam covered some of the particular concerns very well, but I would cover something else, which is PhD students, who will often study for three years. One institution promised them extensions and extensions to their funding when lockdown happened, but now that has been rescinded. So there are real concerns not just about the impact that that has on somebody to actually be able to continue their work and their own wellbeing, but also academic capacity in ensuring that the next generation of academics are not severely impacted now.

**Professor Humphris:** In terms of staff and student wellbeing, we moved very rapidly across all our institutions to set up enhanced hardship funds. In many cases we have deployed philanthropy teams to raise funds for what we are essentially calling our Covid funds.

One of the things that has come out—Zamzam is absolutely right—is that students may be walking around with mobile phones, but that does not mean they have the digital infrastructure wherever they live to be able to study effectively. We are really mindful of that. We have all been leasing or purchasing laptops and dongles to support and getting them out to students. That again does not mean that they have spaces that are conducive to learning.

We have applied blanket mitigating circumstances so that students do not need to do that, so we are looking at all of their assessment needs. We have applied no detriment, which is a considerable amount of work so that no student should suffer detriment. We know the challenges that they are facing. That means my colleagues—my academic colleagues and my professional services colleagues—are doing a large amount of work to look at that across the whole curriculum.

In terms of my staff, I have staff and students—we all have staff and students like this—who are vulnerable, who are being shielded, who are home schooling, as in the rest of society. The impact of this pandemic is affecting so many of us in many ways. Across all of our institutions, we have moved student support services and staff wellbeing services online. Lots of staff are using the medium of teams in a very creative way to connect and support each other.

**Chair:** Thank you. I realise there is a lot to say but, because we have so much to get through in a short space of time, if all of you could be as concise as you can it would really be appreciated. David, do you want to come back, please, before I bring in Tom and Ian briefly?

**David Simmonds:** No, that is fine.

**Chair:** Okay. Ian and then Tom. Ian.

Q210 **Ian Mearns:** One of the things from Zamzam's evidence—which I do not think she mentioned—is that a huge amount of self-supporting students



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have lost their part-time jobs due to the close down of the hospitality industry in particular. I am getting an awful lot of that. Young people, because they are students, then cannot get universal credit, but they have been working to support their study and have now lost those jobs because the industry that they are working in has been effectively shut down.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Absolutely. That is exactly what I highlight. It is important to recognise also that a lot of students work during the summer to be able to move out for university. There is a huge concern of a number of students who are worried about being able to continue studying in institutions that they moved out to study in.

**Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else? Jo?

**Dr Grady:** I could add to that because this has been a real concern of ours as well. In UCU branches where staff have lost their jobs, we have had to set up mutual aid funds. Members who are still in employment are raising money to pay the wages of those who have lost it.

On the back of what you have just said as well, we have seen students and staff in universities who they refuse to put on furlough, even though they could. A student union got in touch with me over the weekend about where a university has just laid everybody off—the students that work in their student union—rather than putting them on furlough, and students cannot claim universal credit unless they withdraw from their modules and their studies. In these instances, the Government need to be much firmer about ensuring that these people, students and staff, go on furlough and that they do not lose their jobs at this time.

**Chair:** Thank you. Any other witness? I will bring in Tom and then Kim. Tom.

Q211 **Tom Hunt:** I have quite a small new university in my constituency, the University of Suffolk, which I can say has performed a huge public service over the last month or so. It has a very large nursing school and a huge contribution has been made by students, particularly third year students, to our local hospital. The role that they have played is very much recognised by me and others in the town.

We also have a very large percentage of students at the University of Suffolk who are mature students. A lot of them have been hit hard by Covid-19. A lot of them have children who they obviously have to home school, in addition to carrying on their studies, in addition to—if they are still able to work—carrying out a job to fund their studies. I would be keen to ensure that in any kind of national approach and strategy from all your organisations to mental health challenges, and just challenges to study in general, that there is also a clear mind that some of the students are part-time or mature students—not all are in the same position.

My last point is to do with university accommodation. I understand that where a university has halls of residence quite often it has come to an



amicable arrangement, but often it is a private landlord and much of our main university accommodation is actually privately managed. At a time when many students are facing great uncertainty—a lot of them have gone home to live with their parents, they have maybe lost a part-time job that they were working at to help fund their studies, the jobs market is going to be very difficult—do you think it would be good of the Government to maybe go slightly further in supporting these students financially if it is the case that their private landlord, not necessarily through their fault, is not able to give them a rent holiday?

**Chair:** Brief answers if you can.

**Professor Humphris:** We released our students from their contractual obligations across our universities for their third term of rent, which is obviously loss of income, but it is a better position for the students. In terms of the private rented sector, anything the Government can do—and your Committee could advise—to support landlords and third-party providers to take a similar approach we would be hugely grateful for that.

Q212 **Chair:** Zamzam, do you want to come in on that?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Yes. One of the things to highlight actually is that from our survey we found that 85% of students have had a loss of income since the crisis, so their finances are a huge issue and a huge concern. Like was mentioned, students are not homogenous. They are not all 18-year-olds. They vary from mature students to people from working class backgrounds and, therefore, everyone has varying issues. It is important to recognise the diversity of the sector.

In terms of accommodation, it is a huge issue that students have been failed on. Scotland recently announced that they changed the terms for private rented accommodation for students to be able to be released from their terms for less than a month. That is something that should be implemented here, because students are having to pay for accommodation they are not living in currently. It is a huge financial worry and concern for students who are building up that debt, who are unable to work and will not be able to pay that off. We are essentially setting up our young people to fail, so that is a massive concern that we should definitely push for.

**Dr Grady:** Zamzam has covered what I would say, but it is important to understand and stress, as you say, that all students are not 18 to 21, and that the whole spread of students and how they experience university really needs to be taken into consideration when we are planning what we are going to do.

Q213 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you to the witnesses today. I want to pick up on what has been said by Tom, because a large number of students in Liverpool have been subjected to the issues of demands for rent, particularly by the purpose-built student accommodation. They are being pursued by debt recovery agents at the moment, which is putting an



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extra burden and extra stress on students. Liverpool relies on a high number of students in the city in terms of its local economy, so that is going to have a major impact.

The other issue that I want to raise is around international students, and the impact on international students who have been unable to return home, their health and wellbeing and the level of support that is being provided. We have high numbers of Chinese students in the city at the moment, and I do get concerned about their health and wellbeing, so just to find out how these people are being supported during this lockdown. Thank you.

**Dr Grady:** Shall I go?

**Chair:** Please.

**Dr Grady:** I think you are completely right and I would echo that, as a union, we have had a problem for a long time with these private providers entering education, but obviously that is kind of the logical extension of the market approach that is being encouraged in the UK, and I think in numerous ways we are seeing the problems with that now.

With respect to whether it is international students from China or just students in general who need high levels of support during this period—I appreciate that group particularly so. This really relates back to the central issue that you were saying that we need a proper underwriting of the sector and not just the crisis management approach that is currently happening. Particularly with large student cohorts, a lot of the teaching that is provided to those students is done by people who might be on teaching-only contracts, and half of teaching-only staff in HE are on fixed-term contracts and 40% of those are on hourly paid contracts. The reason UCU was in dispute this year with employers is that job insecurity and overwork was rife in the sector.

What we have seen from many institutions in the aftermath of lockdown and Covid is a move to get rid of those staff. Not only are they the next generation of academics that have lost their work, but they are also the people that if these students were still on campus they would be going to see them, they would be helping them, so the very staff who would be caring for these students if they were on campus are often the ones who have been targeted and lost their hours or their contracts. Never mind that they do not even know if they have a job in September, they do not know if they have a job next week or next month.

It is really unfortunate that students are not necessarily getting the support that they need, but what I would say is that the uncertainty of not properly stepping in to underwrite the sector and give that stability I think is a main cause of this problem right now.

Q214 **Christian Wakeford:** This was mostly covered in the last response. For those students who cannot go home because they do not have a home to go to or the family are shielding, what added support are universities



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putting in for what I imagine is a very lonely experience on campus where they are potentially isolated themselves? What support is being given for a mental health aspect?

**Professor Humphris:** If I can come in there, I go back to Tom's point about international students who are now in our halls and cannot get home to their families. Across the University Alliance, there is a whole range of measures around hardship, around particular funds that we have gone out to raise. The students are in halls, social distancing, and our colleagues in professional services deliver a whole range of counselling support. We have student support and guidance and tutors—whole sets of colleagues who work specifically with students to support them.

This is a really emotionally challenging time. It is a global pandemic. There will be students who are deeply worried about their families in other countries, so we are doing all we can to support their wellbeing, to make sure they have people checking in with them—colleagues who work in their student accommodation.

**Chair:** Thank you. Zamzam, did you want to say something?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Yes. I just wanted to answer the question around international students and their concerns. It is important to recognise that as soon as they have gone home, they might not have access to resources and be able to access their online learning. There is a huge time difference that needs to be taken account of for a lot of different students. We also need to take into account of how visa extensions are a huge concern for a lot of students. Therefore, tailored support needs to be put in place for international students and, moving forward, a streamlined tier 4 visa process is essentially what is needed to alleviate that stress from the sector but also from international students themselves.

Q215 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I ask you—and we are going to come on to Apsana now about disadvantage—whether you have done your own surveys in terms of how many students do not have proper access to online education—do not have tablets or proper computers that they can use?

**Professor Humphris:** Certainly, across the University Alliance, all of us have been leasing, purchasing—

Q216 **Chair:** I am asking how many specifically do not have access to online learning?

**Professor Humphris:** All that data is being gathered because some of that need has not revealed itself until later on.

Q217 **Chair:** Do you know how many are not accessing online learning at all? That is a slightly different question to how many do not have it.



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**Professor Humphris:** Yes, so the level of engagement and monitoring, the data that we are gathering around that is absolutely vital in terms of linking into students who are disadvantaged to engage them.

Q218 **Chair:** You do not have the figures yet?

**Professor Humphris:** Not across all 11 institutions.

Q219 **Chair:** Does the NUS or UCU have any of those kinds of figures?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** We did a survey of over 10,000 students and we found that 20% of those students said that they were not able to access their online learning and 33% of those students said that they were not receiving an adequate education through their online learning.

Q220 **Chair:** That was 30%—30 or 13? No, you said 20% did not have online, and what is the other figure?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Did not have online learning, and 33% did not agree that their education was adequate quality.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jo?

**Dr Grady:** We have not collected that data.

**Chair:** Thank you. Apsana, thank you, you have been waiting very patiently.

Q221 **Apsana Begum:** Thank you, Chair. I have questions for both Debra and Zamzam. I will perhaps start with Zamzam. You did touch upon some points earlier about, for example, some students who would be normally working throughout the summer in preparation for studies or starting higher education. I guess I want to get a sense of what you expect to be the impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged and vulnerable students in accessing higher education itself, and whether you can share any specific facts or figures or things that you have explored in terms of those that are not going to be able to and whether people with particular kinds of backgrounds are particularly affected by this?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Thank you very much, Apsana. I think I would actually highlight that the money that was funnelled into institutions to be able to develop hardship grants was taken away from widening participation. Now we know that students from widening participation backgrounds already have difficulty accessing universities and, therefore, one of the huge concerns that we have is what the HE sector is going to look like without this money to support those students being able to access education in the first place.

On top of that, one of the things that we do know is essentially going to happen is, with the huge loss in income, a lot of people from working class backgrounds and actually a large percentage of disabled students have told us that they are worried about being able to access university, and are currently having issues being able to access university and keep



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up with their course mates, how they will be able to continue, how the university will be able to adapt, especially if the first semester is going to be held online. So there is a huge worry and concern about what the sector is going to look like in the years to come and how accessible it is going to be for students, especially those students who are unable to even access any of their online resources currently right now.

To highlight what Jo mentioned earlier, a lot of our education comes from these academics who are on casualised contracts and, therefore, who may not have been able to put in the work or may not have been able to develop some of the online learning that might potentially be needed in the semester because of the situation we are currently in. What is really needed is some clear guidance and some clear leadership from the Government to support institutions to be able to highlight very clearly what the university is going to look like and how we are going to ensure that we safely allow people onto campuses.

**Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else? Jo?

**Dr Grady:** I do not necessarily think the question was directed to me but, just in terms of access, I have just a very quick point. We are really concerned about the cancellation of summer exams. Ofqual's announcement that what we will essentially see will be grades awarded by a combination of teacher assessment, class ranking and past performance of schools is clearly going to disproportionately impact on working class students, students with disabilities, BAME cohorts and we are really concerned about that.

**Chair:** I think we are going to be looking at that in part of our work in quite a big way.

**Professor Humphris:** Across the University Alliance we have a very diverse group of students. We are monitoring the data around engagement, providing resources to support students, but I think the point is incredibly well made. We really do need to think about the impact of this, look at the data and where we can use appropriate interventions based on that, as opposed to thinking of it as one intervention applying to everybody.

I am also really mindful around students who are applicants to university for 2020, who will essentially have been out of learning for six months by the time we get to September. We are all looking at ways across the alliance in which we can reach through to students currently in school to help them understand what the transition will be, and also our continuing students, because it will not be the same as it was last year. I would echo Jo and Zamzam's points: what we really need is clear guidance from Government, under the auspices of Public Health England, about how universities can safely return staff and students. That cannot come soon enough.

**Chair:** Thank you. One of the reasons why I asked you the stats was



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because clearly there is a lot of stats and data being done on pupils in schools. The IFS have published things today about disadvantaged pupils. I just wanted to understand if the higher education sector is doing the same thing, but we will raise some of that with the regulator. Kim, you want to come in, please.

**Q222 Kim Johnson:** Yes. A question to all the witnesses, really, and it is around the issue of waiving fees, particularly for those students who have completed nursing and medical courses who then put themselves on the line in terms of fighting Covid-19. Should their fees be reimbursed and waived for this final year?

**Professor Humphris:** The Minister has been quite clear because we are continuing to support and deliver education and learning outcomes for those students. I think it is nursing, medicine, social work, physio—all our students who have gone back across the alliance into practice. That really is a matter for the Minister.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** It is important to recognise these final year students are the first wave of students who are paying the tuition fees, and who are actually serving as key workers, as frontline workers, to actually save us currently. That is an important thing to recognise that our students who study healthcare and, therefore, provide a service to us should not be paying essentially for that service in the first place but actually, at the very least, should have their debt waived.

But wider than that, students who have been impacted quite massively and would like the opportunity to be able to redo or to have their debt written off should have that option, moving forward, in this academic year.

**Chair:** Thank you. Apsana, do you want to come back in at all on your question? Jo, can we save you until that bit, sorry?

**Q223 Apsana Begum:** Yes. Zamzam, you previously mentioned students who need immigration advice, for example, and pastoral care and financial support is an important service. A lot of it is provided by a lot of universities: visa support or disabilities services support. What kind of impact do you think that this is having in terms of students being able to complete their education, and do you think there needs to be a focus around maybe looking into those that have completed their first year and whether there is going to be an increase in first year drop-outs, for example, and retention overall of students in completing their courses?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Yes. I think retention is always a big concern for institutions. Wider than that, what is important to recognise is that students are experiencing issues in many different ways and there needs to be a huge focus on ensuring that students actually have the option to be able to redo or to be reassessed at a later time because of what they are currently facing. That is something that institutions need to take into account when we recognise that UK universities are autonomous and



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operate in very different ways, which sometimes makes my life very hard.

It is important to recognise that, if anything, this crisis has exacerbated the failures of institutions to a certain extent. It has really showed that the mental health support that was in existing institutions and how institutions recognise issues wasn't sufficient enough in the first place.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jo?

**Dr Grady:** I would just echo that point from Zamzam about services that perhaps were not up to scratch before Covid-19 are certainly struggling now.

Just very quickly on the loss of fee income, the idea of waiving fees—reimbursing fees—it is not a debate that can happen in isolation about how we properly fund the sector. One of the reasons we are asking for the sector to be underwritten is because if you were to take out that fee income now, given that that is the way in which the sector gets its funding, you would really be injecting more instability into the sector. For us, underwriting it is the best way to do that.

On the particular issue about nurses and doctors, UCU has had a position for a long time now that we do not think there should be fees in place at all, but we know that the taking away of the bursary led to much lower numbers enrolling on those modules.

**Chair:** Thank you. Apsana, have you finished?

**Apsana Begum:** Yes, thank you.

**Chair:** Kim, have you finished on your bit?

**Kim Johnson:** Yes, thank you.

Q224 **Jonathan Gullis:** This first question is to Zamzam. What are your views on the quality of remote and online teaching and assessments being delivered—which you have obviously referred to a bit earlier—and in what circumstances might a student be justified in seeking a part reimbursement on tuition fees, again building on what you said earlier, please?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Thank you, Jonathan. I think it is important to recognise that—I highlighted this before, because it is no fault of the universities themselves—not a single student is receiving the education that they expected to receive when they started their course. That is an important caveat to recognise, so if you want to have a conversation around quality of education, knowing that quality of education required x number of contact hours for students, for assignments and assessments to be supported by their academics—x, y, z—those things are no longer put in place. I think that is important to recognise.



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A lot of students are struggling even to access what I mentioned earlier—20% of students cannot even access their online learning—but there are a large percentage of students expected to stick to their deadlines and assignments and do assessments at home. I mentioned this before—

**Chair:** Can I just say that we have to finish at 10.30 because of broadcasting restrictions, so if I could just ask you again—all of you—just to be as concise as you possibly can because there are a lot of questions. Carry on, Zamzam—sorry to interrupt you.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Thank you. I apologise for that. I think it is important to recognise that the quality of education, for any of the students, isn't what they expect. Therefore, students should have the option to continue on if they want to and should have their debt written off but also, at the same time, have the ability to redo at a later stage without a detriment or a cost to themselves.

**Chair:** Thank you, Debra, please.

**Professor Humphris:** We are in a global pandemic. It is having an extraordinary impact across all of society. My academic and professional services colleagues have been doing their utmost across the University Alliance to deliver remote learning, teaching and assessment. We have applied mitigating circumstances in a blanket fashion without students needing to pursue it because we know about that. We are applying no detriment policies and always erring on the side of the student, and there is a complaints procedure, which is within our regulations, that we are encouraging students to use should they have particular issues.

I hear Zamzam's point powerfully made. I also see examples every day of my staff across the University Alliance, from conservatoires to physics staff, are making a real impact on how they deliver remote learning at this extraordinary time.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jo, briefly.

**Dr Grady:** Yes. I do not think there is any need to sugar coat this one. Students are not going to be happy at this period, and I do not think that is because of staff who are moving mountains to do what they can, often with no technology provided by their institution, but because they are paying exorbitant fees and have been encouraged to act and think of themselves as customers and they are not getting what they were told to expect.

**Chair:** Jonathan, please, do you want to come back?

Q225 **Jonathan Gullis:** Fantastic, thank you. I would agree that there obviously needs to be a look at the tuition fees, especially after the strike action taken by lecturers as well, which has meant that a lot of first year students in particular have lost an awful lot of their education, which will have a huge impact, as well as those in their third year.



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If I can come then to my final question—it is predominantly for Jo and Debra but, Zamzam, I am happy to hear your views as well—with the online assessment, what strain has that put on staff with the additional stress and strain on the workforce? Zamzam, obviously you have referred to the 20% not being able to access online but what about meeting deadlines? I would just like to hear the additional stress especially on students studying where they need to be in laboratories as referred to earlier.

**Chair:** Very briefly, please, all of you. Thank you. Who would like to go first? Debra?

**Professor Humphris:** In terms of practical assessment, you are absolutely right, Jonathan, that it is a challenge in terms of practice-based learning. The University Alliance has been quite agile in how we flip the curriculum, so we do theory before practice because we will need to get back to that practice-based learning. Online assessment has been a challenge and it is not perfect. I am not sure that any assessment method is perfect, and it is a huge testament to staff across our universities who have worked as hard as they have to bring in online assessment.

**Chair:** Thank you. Zamzam?

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** From our perspective, the institutions have worked as hard as they possibly can to be able to support students. I think that is something that the National Union of Students has recognised. But I do not think they have the support to be able to do that and have not been given proper, clear guidance as to what quality education looks like. That is something that we have highlighted. There has been a varied response from institutions.

**Chair:** Okay.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Also, another thing I wanted to highlight, sorry, is—

**Chair:** Very brief, please.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** —that international students, who have contact with academics, are unable to access content because of restrictions in their home countries and, therefore, unable to complete their courses or get the same quality of learning as their colleagues.

**Chair:** Jo?

**Dr Grady:** Yes, just very quickly. As you can imagine, as Zamzam said at the beginning, institutions that specialise in distance learning have been doing this for decades. We have seen staff have to scramble very quickly to move things online and, as I said, often when fellow staff members have been falsely transitioned into different contracts or threatened with redundancy. People are trying very hard but it is learning new skills over



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a matter of weeks rather than years, and without necessarily the full support of your employer and employment security.

**Chair:** Thank you. Anyone else at all on that? Christian has a quick question on vocational skills.

Q226 **Christian Wakeford:** It is a question mainly for Debra. What work are you doing with your members to support students on vocational and skills-based courses, such as degree apprenticeships and professional courses?

**Chair:** In case you could not hear that, it was about the work you are doing with members to support students on vocational and skills-based courses, such as degree apprenticeships and professional courses. I think this is predominantly one for Debra. I think we will just have you answer that, if that is okay, unless the other two are desperate to answer it. Debra, very briefly, please.

**Professor Humphris:** Across the University Alliance we have been a bit concerned about degree apprenticeships where certainly apprentices have been pulled back into the workforce. That is particularly so in healthcare, but we will do everything we can to support them when they return to their learning.

In terms of the professions, I would have to call out the extraordinary work that a number of the professional regulatory bodies have done to enable flexibility in the curriculum. I would particularly like to single out the Nursing and Midwifery Council, which has worked hugely hard with all our institutions to enable students to complete their studies and to take up practice—

**Chair:** Thank you. Ian, can you combine your questions please because I am going to try to bring Tom in at the very end?

Q227 **Ian Mearns:** Okay. I think from everything that you have said up to now to a certain extent we already know the answer to this question but I think, in terms of getting it on the record, it is important. Is the Government's proposed package of measures enough to secure the long-term stability of higher education? What impact do you think this will have on the higher education workforce? Jo, I would suggest that you go first.

**Dr Grady:** Yes. I will try to be as quick as possible. It is encouraging that the Government have done this but, no, it does not provide or deliver the protection or stability that students, staff and the communities that universities are in deserve. We need far more than IOUs. As I have said, the student cap is a misnomer. It will disproportionately impact on more locally focused institutions who will not be able to compete against the wealthiest ones. It will create a dog-eat-dog approach, which I think puts substantial risk on both our country's academic capacity and the local economy, in which universities play such an important role.



Just very quickly, finally, this is kicking the can down the road. The Government must underwrite the lost funding from the fall in domestic and international student numbers and remove incentives for universities to compete, because we need to come together and not continue like this, so it must involve guaranteed funding for jobs.

**Chair:** Thank you. Debra and then Zamzam.

**Professor Humphris:** The security and sustainability of higher education in this country is absolutely vital to the economic and social recovery of our country and our people, and at this point the measures are a first stage. I look forward to seeing what the second stage will be and, by the autumn, it will be very clear what the impact will be if the Government choose not to intervene.

**Chair:** Thank you. Zamzam briefly.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Yes. I think it has been highlighted already, but it absolutely does not tackle the issues and concerns that we have across the sector. If anything, it solves a cash-flow issue and it brings no new money into the sector, which is so desperately needed, and I think—like Debra said—this is a first attempt and I would like to see what it looks like moving forward.

Q228 **Tom Hunt:** What changes do you anticipate in the short and long terms to how higher education is delivered in England? With the Augar review and the Government's promised White Paper on further education in mind, what do you expect could happen to technical and professional higher education in particular? Also, just finally, there was a Policy Exchange report published a few weeks ago, which suggested potentially any further Government financial support should be conditional upon working together to look at the higher education sector in future, potentially really focusing on technical qualification and qualifications that are needed for the local economy and so on.

**Professor Humphris:** In the University Alliance you see exactly the sorts of universities our country needs going forward, reminding everybody of course that we will be a post-Brexit economy, and we need to be reliant on developing our workforce across professions and technical areas.

I don't think now is the time. We have been waiting for Augar like a sword of Damocles, and I would really like to know where it is going to land. There is a real opportunity not to systematically reorganise yet again, but to renew and to focus strongly on the education ecosystem between further and higher education, much of which we already do. We need to reinvigorate rather than reorganise.

**Chair:** Thank you. Jo and then Zamzam.

**Dr Grady:** Yes. I think the review missed an opportunity to explore radical alternatives to the status quo. We know it was partially because



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the current funding system is so politically toxic, but I think the recommended tuition fee changes look like the worst of all worlds really, so we have quite a few concerns with Augar.

**Chair:** Okay. Zamzam.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** Thank you. If anything, this crisis has highlighted the issues and the concerns in the sector and has exacerbated those issues. Our institutions are not built on a sustainable model and the funding stream does not essentially work. If anything, we have been able to see that through this crisis. A lot of the issues that have been raised have been issues that have actually been raised and have just become much more apparent and much more concerning at this current time.

**Chair:** Thank you. We have one final question from Kim. If you could do a one sentence or two sentence question, and you guys can have one or two sentence answers.

Q229 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Chair, I will be very brief. There is a major disparity at the moment in terms of the salaries of some of the vice-chancellors in our university—some in excess of £500,000—compared to the casualisation of teaching staff, some of whom are now reliant on food banks. So what do you think needs to happen to bridge that gap and make sure that we get rid of the casualisation of teaching staff?

**Chair:** Actually, Kim has made a very good point. Some of the salaries seem a bit obscene and with no proper measurements on performance as well or actual transparency about them. Please, if you three can answer in one sentence, that would be great.

**Professor Humphris:** The salaries of vice-chancellors are overseen by remuneration committees who are independent members of governing bodies. The vice-chancellor is not involved in those. I think if you look across the University Alliance you will see that our average salary is below—

Q230 **Chair:** Some vice-chancellors are on their own remuneration committees, is that not the case?

**Professor Humphris:** Not in my institution that is for sure.

Q231 **Chair:** In some institutions they are.

**Professor Humphris:** Then that is a practice that should stop.

**Zamzam Ibrahim:** It is a huge concern when the gap between the academics and staff who actually deliver the frontline learning and the vice-chancellor is so huge. A lot of what is done is that essentially vice-chancellors are used as a scapegoat to recognise that there is a wider financial issue within institutions. Taking the vice-chancellors' pay and spreading that out to academics might solve the issue in the short term but it does not actually solve the financial issue in universities and institutions.



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**Chair:** Thank you. Jo, briefly please?

**Dr Grady:** I think when people learn of the eye-watering salaries of the vice-chancellors they are quite normally shocked. Particularly when you have a sector whose business model is built upon the exploitation of casualised staff and staff on fixed-term contract after fixed-term contract, to the point where they barely earn minimum wage when they are delivering teaching. It is quite astounding. Our union has said that there should be ratios in place to ensure that they do not earn any particular amount more than the lowest paid, because the fact is the very lowest paid in universities have often—by the time we get to mid-January the pay discrepancy between vice-chancellors and them that is when they have earned as much in that period as the lower paid.

**Chair:** This is an issue we have looked at in the Committee before, transparency and performance measures are crucial I think in all this. Can I thank you very much, all of you? We could probably have talked to you for at least six hours. I am sorry because of broadcasting restrictions that we had to rush through it, but it is hugely appreciated, all of you. Zamzam, Debra and Jo, thank you for coming and I wish you, your members, your universities, your staff and all the profession well at this time.

We are going to have a three-minute break and start at 10.35 am while the new panel gets on board. Thank you, everybody.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nicola Dandridge and Sir Michael Barber.

Q232 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming this morning. This is our second session on Covid-19 and higher education this morning. It gives me huge pleasure to welcome both the witnesses to us on Zoom. Could you kindly introduce yourselves, your positions and the names of your organisations for the benefit of those watching Parliamentlive.tv?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Yes. Thank you, Chair. I am Sir Michael Barber, Chair of the Office for Students.

**Nicola Dandridge:** I am Nicola Dandridge, and I am the Chief Executive of the Office for Students.

Q233 **Chair:** Thank you. UCAS's multiple equality measure suggests that just 12.3% of the most disadvantaged pupils aged 18 in England get into higher education institutions compared to 56.3% of the most advantaged group. We know that universities have to sign access and participation agreements to charge full fees, which oblige them to spend some of the extra revenue they receive on outreach. What are universities realistically doing and able to do during the lockdown to meet their outreach targets? Is the OfS closely monitoring universities' outreach efforts during the lockdown?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Chair, thank you very much for the question. It is an important question. I want to give you a bit of context before I come to the specifics of your question.

Access and participation has been the single top priority for the board of the OfS from its inception. We have talked about it on a previous occasion. We have an excellent person on Nicola's management team, Chris Milward, who is the director of fair access and participation. We have revolutionised the way this has been thought about over the last two years. Each university had to put forward to us a five-year programme with goals and targets for the next five years to reduce the various attainment gaps, like the black attainment gap, and the various access gaps like the one that you have referred to in your question. For the first time, universities have set ambitious goals. We have looked at all those goals, we have totalled them up and we published that report in January. If those goals are met, the figure you have mentioned would be massively reduced. The problem would be reduced. The benefits would be gained. Similarly, on the black achievement gap, that would be halved over the five-year period if the universities are held to account for the goals they have submitted to us. We are now monitoring their progress against those goals.

Of course, when that was done, we had no idea we were going to be in the middle of a Covid-19 crisis. The way we are thinking about that is we are saying there is no change and no let-up on the goals. The goals for



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five years we are going to hold you to account for, but there can be flexibility in the short term as we go through this crisis about how to handle that. We will be holding universities to account. To be fair, they are saying to us that they think this is an important agenda, so we are on the case.

We are really hoping this will be a transformative opportunity to transform social mobility and social justice right across the university sector. We are supporting that through the kinds of partnerships that you mentioned, through our best practice sharing, through our centre called TASO and through enhanced mental health services. We also have particular programmes for particular groups like care leavers, estranged students, disabled students—

**Q234 Chair:** My question was about what universities are realistically able to do during the lockdown to meet their outreach targets and how you are monitoring it. Programmes are great. I want to see the practice on the ground, if you like.

**Sir Michael Barber:** As with large threads of society, universities have to adapt and learn fast and learn deep about how this is working and the best practice. We are monitoring that in some depth. Nicola might want to add on the precise details of how we are doing that, but we are absolutely on this case, and we are regularly in touch with universities about it.

**Nicola Dandridge:** Perhaps I can add to that. At the Office for Students, we not only require universities and colleges to take active steps to address these gaps in participation that you mentioned, Chair, but also we fund programmes to encourage collaboration between universities and colleges and schools precisely to try to address these issues.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, we have signalled to universities and colleges that they can repurpose that funding. Instead of working in schools, which they cannot do now, we are suggesting and allowing them to use that funding online, digitally, in a different way to achieve the same outcomes. We are doing what we can in the constraints of the current environment to support universities to collaborate with schools in different ways that will try to address some of those issues you have identified.

**Q235 Chair:** I think you were listening to my questions in the session before when I asked about whether surveys are being done as to how many students are accessing online education. Are you doing that? Are you looking at the individual quality of online education provided by those universities and how they are helping disadvantaged students if they do not have that access to proper online tools?

**Nicola Dandridge:** We are acutely aware of the challenges facing all students but particularly disadvantaged students when moving from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning. In terms of how many



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students are unable to access online learning, it is not a binary thing that you either can or cannot. We understand that many students might, for instance, have weak wi-fi or not have the appropriate hardware or are not living in an environment where it is easy for them to work because they are living in a crowded household. It tends to be all manner of things coming together. We are very aware that universities are looking into this. They are adopting all sorts of strategies to try to identify it. I was reading this morning, as it happens, of a university that has teamed up with a bus company to try to take wi-fi out to disadvantaged communities. Yes, we are looking at this closely. It is a real challenge.

If I can add, Chair, that we are also publishing examples of good practice where universities have undertaken particularly innovative—

Q236 **Chair:** But in a nutshell, are you looking at each individual university to see what it is doing?

**Nicola Dandridge:** We are monitoring each individual university, yes.

Q237 **Chair:** Yes. Thank you. Disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out of HE in their first year than their better-off peers. The HE Statistics Agency suggested that the rate in 2016-17 for disadvantaged students was 8.8% among full-time first-degree students under 21 compared to 6% for their better-off peers. Given that disadvantaged students are more prone to drop out of their courses, it is possible that the lockdown will raise the risk of drop-out because students cannot work for themselves financially or because the lockdown makes it harder for them to get pastoral support. How much work is being done to provide disadvantaged individuals with specific tailored support during lockdown? Can you provide examples of this?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Thank you, Chair. This is a task for each university. As Nicola was saying, we are in touch with them regularly. They are really thinking hard about all these challenges that you are raising. As I was saying earlier, they are looking at specific groups of students and their particular deficits. We are holding them to account for managing that and they will be—

Q238 **Chair:** What does "holding to account" mean? I am not clear from your answers on how you are literally holding the institutions to account in this regard specifically in terms of disadvantaged students.

**Sir Michael Barber:** As I mentioned, the goal is for five years out, but that—

Q239 **Chair:** Yes, but that is the general thing. I am talking about specifically under Covid-19.

**Sir Michael Barber:** No. It is specific. It is a five-year goal, but we track it year by year. This year, we will be checking progress towards that five-year goal. We are not relenting on the goal. But we understand the pressures on universities and on students at this very moment, so we will



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be working with them, showing them what other universities are doing and doing well, helping them to learn fast from each other. In the end, the attitudes will be positive to solving the challenges you are rightly raising, but we are going to have to learn as we go. It is about being creative and that sense of solidarity with the goal but creative about finding solutions.

**Q240 Chair:** If I could ask a question about degree apprenticeships, your credo talks a lot about degree apprenticeships, and you want progression from level 2 right up to degree apprenticeships, which is a good thing. We know that disadvantaged families are two and a half times less likely to know about degree apprenticeships than other pupils, and career advice is loaded in favour of more traditional routes. One survey suggested that just 41% of 11 to 16-year-old pupils said the teacher actually discussed an apprenticeship as a career option with them. This was actually the subject of my maiden speech in 2010 in the House of Commons, so things haven't really got better.

How many universities that offer degree apprenticeships have included specific outreach targets in their access agreements to boost disadvantaged pupils' knowledge of degree apprenticeships?

**Sir Michael Barber:** I will hand over to Nicola to answer some of the detail of this, but I want to say, Chair, that we talked about this very issue the first time I was before this Committee. I want to assure you that in 2015-16 there were 741 degree apprenticeship starts at level 6. This year there were 10,303. That is a big growth over a four-year period and lots of universities are taking this up. I visited degree apprenticeship programmes at Warwick, Exeter, Sheffield, South Devon College, the Dyson Institute and so on. This is a great step forward.

You are right to raise and draw our attention to the fact that information is not getting always to the right people. Our communication with students is improving dramatically and Nicola can talk about that, but this is very much on our agenda and we see it as important. Like any other course, we are going to find flexible ways of helping universities through this particular Covid-19 crisis and keeping the degree apprenticeship programmes on track.

**Nicola Dandridge:** We have seen that universities and colleges identify the role of degree apprenticeships in their access and participation plans. They are telling us that they see the growth of degree apprenticeships as one of the ways in which they can reach their targets and their ambitions in terms of recruiting larger numbers of disadvantaged students. The way the universities will look at this is as a critical mechanism for encouraging students to take up degree apprenticeships to achieve their own aspirations in terms of increasing numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Sir Michael Barber:** We are promoting degree apprenticeships through Discover Uni, our new student communication tool.



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Q241 **Chair:** Do you find that with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, IfATE, the bureaucracy is better or worse in terms of working with universities to have degree apprenticeships? If you could just answer very briefly, please.

**Nicola Dandridge:** We work constructively with IfATE and we are hopeful that it will be an even more successful regulator and supporter of these programmes.

Q242 **Chair:** Finally, just before I pass to my colleagues, there is evidence that high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be under-predicted than high-achieving peers from better-off backgrounds. Does the replacement of exams with teacher assessments risk suffering from the same problem or does the involvement of other organisations such as Ofqual and exam bodies in this process make it more likely that disadvantaged pupils will be awarded fair grades?

**Sir Michael Barber:** It is an important issue for you to raise, Chair. The very fact of raising it will help get it addressed during this very unusual summer. In my days as a person responsible for school reform in England, I used to worry about this a lot. Tests and exams tend to be much better at getting achievement from students from disadvantaged backgrounds and this summer there is a real risk. But I do know that the Ofqual people are aware of the data on that and that awareness is going to be the key to solving the problem.

**Nicola Dandridge:** We are working closely with Ofqual to identify and anticipate exactly that issue. Both organisations are live to it.

Q243 **Tom Hunt:** It is encouraging to see the significant increase there has been in degree apprenticeships, but it still seems to me that there is a long way to go. A lot of the universities I talk to, for which I believe their primary focus may well be degree apprenticeships, are still telling me that the financial incentive really is not there. It is not particularly attractive for many universities to go down the route of degree apprenticeships. Even though they can see the real benefits, it does not really pay for them to do so. Anything that you can do with the Government to try to really incentivise universities, particularly new universities, to really go after degree apprenticeships would be welcome. That is what I am hearing from many of them at the moment.

**Chair:** To back up Tom, I hear exactly the same and also about the bureaucracy one way or another, whether it is the Government, whether it is the Institute, which I know is doing good work. But there seems to be one obstacle after another to get these things properly off the ground.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Tom, you make a good point, reinforced by the Chair. We are constantly working behind the scenes on the details of how these programmes work. You make good points.

Q244 **Kim Johnson:** The access gap is not a recent problem. It has been a perennial problem for black students and students from disadvantaged



communities. What role does unconscious bias have in those issues, particularly around predictive grading? What monitoring are you doing to ensure that disadvantaged students are not disproportionately affected by Covid-19 at any stage in their journey to and through higher education? How can you be confident that providers' access and participation plans are sufficient to ensure all providers are doing enough for most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners, particularly as we have heard that the widening participation funding is being used for other things at the moment? Thank you.

**Sir Michael Barber:** These are important questions. As I was saying to the Chair, this is our top priority as an institution. The board has highlighted access and participation as its top priority right from the beginning and will continue to do so. We have the access and participation plans that go through five years. Universities in general have been ambitious, to their credit, in wanting to narrow gaps, whether it is the black attainment gap or these access gaps that have been referred to. This is absolutely on our agenda, and we are regularly monitoring progress against the trajectories to those five-year goals. This year will be demanding for universities, but there may be opportunities as well as threats in that.

But if those five-year goals are met, the black attainment gap would be halved over that period of time. As you said, Kim, this is a longstanding issue. You highlighted some of the causes of that. The fact that it is now so explicitly on every university's agenda and that we are holding them to account annually, at least, for progress on those is going to put it and keep it on their agenda all the way through. Those unconscious biases that you referred to can be addressed. The data will be examined university by university at the highest levels to try to address these gaps. I personally think in the next five years we will see the biggest step forward in social mobility and social justice in higher education in two generations.

Q245 **Chair:** Does that include part-time learners? There has been a big decline in part-time learners because they are much more reluctant to take out loans and they may have a child or whatever it may be. What are you going to do to reverse that?

**Sir Michael Barber:** I will come to Nicola in a minute. The data is beginning to turn, but I may be wrong. Nicola?

**Nicola Dandridge:** It might be worth noting that in the way we regulate, we take into account the outcomes for different groups of students and that includes full-time and part-time. It includes students from different ethnicities. It includes different socioeconomic backgrounds. Everything that we assess—and that includes not just participation but continuation dropouts, degree outcomes, graduate outcomes, in every respect—we are monitoring in relation to the experience for different cohorts of students. Looking at this is integral to our regulatory approach.



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Q246 **Chair:** I think we have some technical issues so I will ask Jonathan's questions. What action will you take when students are dissatisfied with the quality of tuition they are receiving while higher education providers are operating remotely? How would you evaluate student requests to have all or part of their tuition fees reimbursed for the disruptions their teaching has experienced this year?

**Nicola Dandridge:** Our focus at the Office for Students is ensuring that, so far as possible, all universities and colleges are making every reasonable effort to ensure that students continue to learn, continue with their studies and are supported to receive good outcomes and that the quality of their teaching is robust. Clearly, it is different. It is not face-to-face learning. It is online learning, but we have made it clear that we expect universities and colleges to make all reasonable efforts to secure as good quality provision as they can.

In addition, of course students have contractual rights and they have rights under consumer protection regulation. We are about to publish guidance on those issues. If students feel that they have not had the quality of teaching that they expected, then they do have rights to complain to the ombudsman, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and of course they have legal rights as well. But the important thing from our point of view is that we do everything we can to work with universities and colleges and require them to ensure that the quality of the teaching they are providing is as good as can be in these constrained and difficult circumstances.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Chair, can I add to that with two things? Every day, we review all the reportable events—that is when universities feel they need to report something—and the notifications we get about the quality of teaching. In a couple of cases we have called a university and intervened briefly to correct something or to find out if what we have heard is correct. We are on this case daily.

Of course, the challenges are widespread but universities are working hard at this and are making some progress.

Q247 **Chair:** Thank you. How do you evaluate the risk to students with mandatory practical elements in their courses such as work placement or lab-based elements? What effect do you anticipate on the higher-level apprenticeships? I know we have discussed a little bit of this already.

**Nicola Dandridge:** This question of work-based learning or placements is a real challenge. We are seeing that where, for example, you have first or second-year students, there are ways in which, if they can, those work-based elements are postponed to next year and there is more of a focus on theoretical learning this year. Where those sorts of adjustments can be made, they are being made. But where that cannot happen, we are seeing universities really thinking through the essential elements of the course that have to be delivered. I heard Debra Humphris talk about this in the earlier session. There is close liaison with the professional



statutory and regulatory bodies to make sure that they are satisfied that graduating students have the experiences and qualifications they need. There are different mechanisms being developed to make sure that those sorts of issues are addressed. There is lots of focus on this at the moment and adjustments being made. It is the best that universities can do in these circumstances.

Q248 **Chair:** Could I ask you about the disadvantaged students again? We know that the IFS has published a survey today on the learning gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. Are you doing similar work with organisations like the IFS to see what is happening in HE?

**Nicola Dandridge:** As Michael has said, we are looking very closely at the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on students. It is too early to see what the impact will be on outcomes, so what—

Q249 **Chair:** The thing that came out today by the IFS was about those who are learning now, advantage and disadvantage, and comparing—

**Nicola Dandridge:** We undoubtedly will be doing that, but we have to wait and see how it works through over the course of the next few months.

**Sir Michael Barber:** The OfS has good individual student-level data for a lot of the evidence that underpins a lot of decisions. We are looking at this stage all the time.

Q250 **Ian Mearns:** Good morning, Sir Michael. Good morning, Nicola. Your consultation on a new condition of registration is broad in its scope and signals a change in the tolerance of competitive practice in higher education. How confident are you that you can successfully enforce this?

**Nicola Dandridge:** It is a good question. It is worth saying that this consultation on a new regulatory condition is solely related to the coronavirus pandemic. This is time limited. It is an emergency intervention to try to contain and control as much as we can the process of admissions in particular. We are also looking more broadly at how we can regulate to ensure the stability and integrity of the sector.

How confident are we? It is early days. It is only a consultation at the moment. But precisely by defining the scope of the proposed consultation quite broadly, we will have a much greater likelihood of success in trying to ensure that student interests are protected and that the sector is broadly stable. We will see how the consultation goes, but we do feel that this is the sort of intervention we need.

Of course, we are not doing this in isolation. There has been reference to the Department for Education's student number cap, which is also seeking to assist the stability of this year's admissions process.

Q251 **Ian Mearns:** Do you expect this to signal a move away from competition in higher education, even on a temporary basis?



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**Nicola Dandridge:** No. It is not going to change that fundamental approach. It is a way of regulating the sector to make sure that it works in the interests of students and the country.

**Sir Michael Barber:** I agree with Nicola, clearly, but I think of this consultation on a temporary new power as the “generosity of spirit” condition. When universities think not just about their own interests but about the sector more broadly, they will not fall foul of it. This is to encourage people to think about the sector as a whole because our job, apart from the specifics we have been discussing, is a stewardship function. We want to shepherd the university sector through this difficult time so that it can still be one of the great university sectors in the world.

**Nicola Dandridge:** The sector itself asked for this sort of regulatory intervention, so it was not us alone coming out with it. We did have a moratorium on offer making that was announced by the Minister and the sector respected that. There is a degree of goodwill to try to make this work from all parties.

Q252 **Ian Mearns:** The condition of registration will be applied retrospectively, so how can you be sure that this will be enough to reassure students and providers across the country who are making decisions now about applications and admissions?

**Nicola Dandridge:** The consultation does propose that it has some degree of retrospective application precisely to provide that reassurance to students. What we are doing here is trying to ensure that the admissions process this summer is as smooth and as stable as possible and, actually, similar to what happened last year. From the perspective of the students, they should feel reassured and there are plenty of places available to them. If this works through as we intend, students should be supported in the way that they have every right to expect.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Chair, to be clear, if a student has been made an offer by a university and has accepted that offer and then gets the grades, nothing in this power will change that. Nothing that we are proposing would disrupt a student’s access to university in those circumstances. I want to be clear for the students who may be following this and for their parents.

Q253 **Ian Mearns:** Given that students, like everybody else, will have no certainty that universities will be anything like back to normal by the time the term begins in the autumn, what is your thinking on that?

**Nicola Dandridge:** This is clearly an issue because none of us knows exactly what is going to be happening in the autumn. We are requiring that universities are as clear as they can be to students so that students, when they accept offers from universities, know in broad terms what they will be getting. We do not want to see promises that it is all going to be back to the usual on-campus experience when it turns out that that is not



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the case. The important thing here is absolute clarity to students so they know what they are getting in advance of accepting offers.

Q254 **Apsana Begum:** I have some questions around the stability of the sector overall and the future of higher education itself.

To begin with, what is the Office for Students intending to do to safeguard the future of the higher education sector, particularly if there is a slump in the number of international students and a threat to providers' financial security? We heard today in the earlier panel about the impact of remote learning on international students and concerns about how they are going to be retained in the higher education sector. To hear from you both would be good.

**Nicola Dandridge:** This is a huge issue and I know Michael will want to come in as well. We know that the impact of coronavirus on the financial sustainability of the sector is going to be significant. It is a serious issue. We are not yet clear how many international students are going to come to the country this autumn. We would need to wait and see to some extent. Meantime, we are not identifying any university or college at immediate risk of collapse, but that is not to be complacent because we are aware of the significant risks here.

The Government's package was significant. It amounted to the availability of up to £700 million of loans, which, as the previous session identified, eases cash flow. It important to say that discussions are ongoing with the Government and other parties as to what more assistance might be needed.

The answer to your question is, yes, this is a real issue and we are taking it extremely seriously. We are monitoring some universities and colleges on a weekly basis if not more frequently because it is absolutely critical in all of this that we are not in a situation where students find that the university or college they are applying to go to is in real financial difficulty. This is a number one priority for us.

Q255 **Apsana Begum:** In terms of working with providers to ensure that student protection plans are sufficiently detailed and robust and address the new financial challenges that may be faced by higher education providers, what work are you doing, if any, on that?

**Sir Michael Barber:** First, this is very much on our minds all the time. One of the things we have tried to establish is that when a university itself thinks it is getting into some kind of difficulty, they come to us. We have tried to get what we call "trust-based regulation" where they come to us so that the problems are identified early and not in a late crisis stage. Then we can work with them behind the scenes to help solve those problems. We have had to do that occasionally in the past and it is likely to be more intense in the future.

As Nicola said, there is ongoing dialogue with the Government. There is a ministerial working group looking at what to do about research funding,



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for example, which may or may not make a difference in the medium term.

When we know more about international students and about what choices domestic students are making in August, we will be much clearer on what the scale of the challenge is here. We will deal with that on a case-by-case basis, but we are absolutely monitoring this daily and weekly.

Q256 **Apsana Begum:** You do not yet have a sense of that?

**Sir Michael Barber:** There are various surveys as to whether international students will or will not come back. You heard the previous panel refer to one or two of those. The truth is that nobody really knows. Even the international students themselves will not necessarily have made decisions at this point, so it depends how many of them come or come back. Again, we do not know the choices until clearing in August that domestic students will make, either. That is when universities will be really clear on what the picture is financially for them. We are saying to them, "In the meantime, if you think you might be facing difficulties, come to us early and we will start talking that through". We will look at it on a case-by-case basis.

Q257 **Apsana Begum:** In terms of your role and the Department's proposals for restructuring when providers encounter financial difficulties, what role do you see yourself playing in that and what role are you currently playing in that?

**Sir Michael Barber:** We have been working closely with the Department all the way through this crisis. In fact, one of the first things we did when the crisis hit was basically to become part of the team helping to solve the problems across the higher education sector. We are working with the Department on how any intervention or restructuring would look. Nicola is right at the heart of those conversations and may want to add to that.

**Nicola Dandridge:** I do not have much to add because it is exactly as Michael sets out. We are working closely with the Government and with the Department, as you would expect, to try to identify and anticipate and then work out ways of responding.

Q258 **Apsana Begum:** In terms of higher technical education, there are going to be proposed changes to the higher education sector overall and a move to online learning. What opportunities do you see in this situation for furthering your work on promoting higher technical education?

**Sir Michael Barber:** It is nice to have a question that is talking about opportunities, so thank you very much for that. There are real opportunities here. Lots of people who have been cautious about doing it are learning how to do online learning and how to do blended teaching and learning.

**Chair:** We are all learning how to use Zoom as a Committee, yes.



**Sir Michael Barber:** We have certainly learned how to use Zoom, you have as a Committee and we have as an organisation, absolutely. There are real opportunities here to build on this as we come out of the crisis. A lot will depend on the response of the Government to the Augar review and all of that. We are waiting to see how that develops and the promised developments in FE, which are important for the future of the country. We are sympathetic to the spirit of that direction of travel and will adapt and refine what we do according to how FE and higher education develop in the context of Augar and all of that.

Q259 **David Johnston:** I want to go back to the issue of international students. I worked in and around university access for quite a while before politics, and I have had a concern that certain universities might be devoting too much time to chasing international students because of the higher fees that they come with—much more time than they devote to widening access for young people in this country. Do you have any concerns that some universities might have got themselves into a position where they are overly reliant on international fee income?

**Nicola Dandridge:** Most universities would see international students as making a really positive contribution to the work they do and to the experience of the domestic students as well as the multicultural, global approach of the universities, acknowledging that the fee income is really important, too. The international element is generally regarded as a positive thing.

Are they spending too much time recruiting international students? The financial vulnerabilities that the coronavirus pandemic has exposed will cause some universities to look again at the balance there, but it would be a tremendous pity if as a result of this there was a reduction of international students coming to this country, which, I think, is very positive.

That should not, however, to answer your question, in any respect compromise the work on outreach for domestic students and recruiting disadvantaged students. They should never be seen in that light. If indeed it is the case that some universities are spending more time on international students than addressing domestic issues, then that is wholly wrong. Our regulation is dealing with that for all the reasons we have run through. We are setting challenging targets in relation to outreach and supporting disadvantaged students. I would hope that the one was never being set against the other.

**Sir Michael Barber:** To reinforce that, given your background in the Social Mobility Foundation, I hope we will fulfil some of the aspirations you had when you were doing that work, as I was saying earlier. Some of the universities that recruit large numbers of international students, like UCL or King's London or Oxford and Cambridge, have put forward quite ambitious access and participation plans. As Nicola said, it is not either/or. They can do both.



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Q260 **Kim Johnson:** My question is around competition. In my constituency, I have three universities. With a possible reduction in students, there is going to be increased competition for these students by all of those universities. I want to know what role your office will have in looking at and making sure that one university does not fail as a result of others. Thanks.

**Nicola Dandridge:** That is exactly why we are consulting on this proposed new regulatory condition: to try to constrain competition that would not work in the interests of students or indeed the stability and integrity of the sector. That is a fantastic example you have given as to why we need this regulatory condition and why, separately, also the Department has introduced these student number caps of 5% on forecast numbers. We are live to this issue and are addressing it actively and robustly.

Q261 **Chair:** Could I go back to the disadvantaged? I am trying to understand what specifically you are doing in terms of individual universities that you may feel are not doing enough to look after those students who are left behind under the current Covid-19 situation. At the beginning you said you are doing monitoring in general, but I am trying to understand specifically how you are looking at each university, how you can track whether those students are being looked after or not and the quality of education they are being given.

**Nicola Dandridge:** The way we monitor the regulatory process is that we require information from universities, so they tell us if there is a particular problem. As I said before, we will always filter that through the lens of the impact of this on disadvantaged students. Likewise, we encourage students and third parties to notify us if they have concerns. Again, we will be live to looking at whether there are particular issues facing black students or students from disadvantaged backgrounds. That happens on the one side.

On the other, we are funding universities to take certain actions. I mentioned this before. We fund outreach activities that we are now allowing universities to repurpose, particularly focusing on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and we are allowing flexibility in how they can allocate our student premium funding towards hardship funds for students.

There is a lot of work happening on both fronts to try to address that issue.

Q262 **Chair:** Are enough funds going to disadvantaged pupils who do not have proper access to online education or a proper quality room or home to work in?

**Nicola Dandridge:** There would probably never be enough money for that because it is such a huge challenge, but we are seeing universities being largely innovative and creative in trying to respond to these challenges. Look, this is a huge problem for universities trying to deal



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with these things and an even huger problem for students to try to respond. We are trying to ensure that universities take all reasonable approaches to try to address these things and we cannot do more than that.

**Sir Michael Barber:** I want to give you a couple of examples of these notifications that we have had. One notification we had was that a university had put out guidance that said that students without laptops should take a leave of absence. That was drawn to our attention and we intervened with the university. It then said the guidance was in error and it has been corrected and that is not happening.

Q263 **Chair:** Which university was that?

**Sir Michael Barber:** I am not going to name names. Then—

Q264 **Chair:** Hold on. Why should we not know who that is?

**Sir Michael Barber:** Because it was an error and it has been corrected. I do not want to embarrass the university, but I wanted to give you a specific example.

Q265 **Chair:** How much of that is going on?

**Sir Michael Barber:** We have had a relatively small number of notifications like that, not a lot, I would say.

Q266 **Chair:** You talked about how it is important to look at opportunities as well. To me, if you look at the Open University, that has always been the Rolls Royce of online learning and has reached out to thousands of disadvantaged students over many years who would have never had time or been able to access higher education.

What are the opportunities for institutions like that in all this, particularly as we come out of it? It is the Rolls Royce of online learning. Should we, whether as an Education Committee or as a Government, be doing more to support institutions like that, given the incredibly important role they play?

**Sir Michael Barber:** I completely agree that the Open University has a huge opportunity now, but it goes well beyond that. Every university has the opportunity to rethink how it does teaching and learning. As many universities have already done, you put your lectures online, the students watch the lectures online and then the classes are about discussion, debate and argument to get into the—

Q267 **Chair:** There is a big difference between bunging stuff online and having the interaction and the years of knowledge that the Open University has in terms of doing this.

**Sir Michael Barber:** I agree, but other universities have made some progress in this area and can learn from the Open University and its daily experience right now. There are real opportunities there and they may be



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ones that can help them find better ways of reaching the disadvantaged students you have rightly highlighted through this session.

**Nicola Dandridge:** What we are likely to see this autumn is much greater and more sophisticated use of blended learning. That is face-to-face plus online. I entirely agree that that cannot be just bunging lectures online. It has to be more sophisticated than that. I suspect that is what we are going to be seeing much more of over the course of the next year.

Q268 **Chair:** Will you be monitoring that?

**Nicola Dandridge:** Yes. We will be monitoring the outcomes from that and also student satisfaction. We run the national student survey, which asks a whole range of questions, including on the quality of teaching, assessment and feedback. That will be a good indicator as to students' response to any shift in this way.

Q269 **Chair:** Do you see any change fundamentally in the role of universities? Many universities do this already, but in terms of a wider focus not just on blended learning, as you call it, but also on vocational learning alongside academic learning and on outcomes and meeting the skills needs. We will have a serious problem when we come out of this in terms of reskilling the public, many of whom—hopefully not—are likely to have lost their jobs in redundancies and so on.

**Sir Michael Barber:** We will see a variety of responses by individual universities. Some of the questions you raise will become national policy issues over time. It will not just be university by university. We will see adaptation. If you are the key to employment in, say, Teesside or Wolverhampton, you are going to be thinking hard about how you adapt what you put on to develop the local economy.

Q270 **Chair:** Will you be monitoring that as a regulator, both of you? Nicola, please, you come in as well.

**Nicola Dandridge:** Yes, we look closely at what courses are being delivered and also the graduate outcomes for students. This wider agenda about the shape the economy needs to be in post-coronavirus is going to have a direct impact on the courses universities offer and the graduate skills we need. Yes, we are looking at this closely and will continue to do so.

Q271 **Ian Mearns:** We did skirt about there in terms of dealing with this crisis and items of good practice and how that is being disseminated and also whether there are examples of universities making significant errors in how they are dealing with this and their interaction with their students and staff. How are we disseminating the good practice? If we are not willing to name universities that are making mistakes, how are we preventing other universities from following those errors?

**Sir Michael Barber:** First, on access and participation, we are promoting best practice actively. Secondly, more generally, we are working with the



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leaders in the sector to identify practices that are working. We can identify—to take the second part of your question—practices that we do not think are right and we share those. Without necessarily naming universities, we can make the practice clear.

The most important thing in all of this—not just for the university sector, incidentally—is how rapidly we learn from the totally new circumstances and adapt and refine. The emphasis you have put on learning from best practice and learning from error is fundamental and is at the heart of what we have done.

We changed our regulatory framework from the conditions we had before the coronavirus and we introduced a new regulatory framework<sup>1</sup>. The first one is learning and teaching. The second is examinations and assessment. These are now our two top priorities for learning, developing and working with the sector.

**Nicola Dandridge:** In terms of disseminating good practice in response to coronavirus, this is a really important role that we can play. We have published examples of good practice in relation to student mental health, estranged students and also student accommodation. We are planning to do more. Disseminating examples of good practice is a powerful way that we can influence the agenda.

Likewise, if there are examples of where things have not worked, we can also promote that. It is a bit too early to say what has not worked at this stage, but we will need to review that once it is clearer.

Q272 **Ian Mearns:** There have been quite a number of advertisements on television, etc. from many universities now touting their wares in terms of online learning programmes. What are you doing in particular to make sure that those online learning programmes are quality assured? Some of them will be coming from a relatively standing start compared to the long-term competitor in that field, which is of course the Open University.

**Nicola Dandridge:** We will be regulating all courses whether they are online or face-to-face, so that absolutely falls within our remit. We approach our regulatory responsibilities in terms of outcomes and that is informed by what students tell us, particularly through the national student survey but also through complaints and other mechanisms as well. If students tell us that this online learning they are receiving is fantastic, that is great. If, however, it transpires that it is not what they expected, is not what they wanted and is not leading to the outcomes, then they will tell us that and we will intervene. Likewise, if we find that students studying online do not get the graduate outcomes and are not

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<sup>1</sup> Revision by witness: The OfS has changed its reporting requirements during the pandemic to ensure that these are focused on key areas of risk. This represents a change to operational reporting requirements, rather than to the regulatory framework itself.



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getting the jobs, then we will intervene because these are all important indicators that inform our regulatory response.

We will see how all of this works out, but we are not prejudging online as good or bad. We need to assess it.

**Q273 Ian Mearns:** A possible problem with that approach, Nicola, is that it will not be until students have already spent money and engaged in these courses that they find out they are not what they should be. Would the Office for Students be involved in any sort of mystery shopping in this respect to try to find out if these new courses being provided by universities are up to scratch?

**Nicola Dandridge:** The notification system is real time, and we work closely with student unions. We have not mentioned the role of the student unions, but they are playing an important role in all of this. If there are problems in real-time delivery, then students or student unions will let us know. We do not have an inspection-based regulatory system. That is not how we work.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Ian's question mentioned advertising. If our new power goes forward after the consultation, one of the things it will enable us to do is intervene when there is any misleading information put out. If there was advertising that was directly misleading, that would enable us to intervene.

**Q274 Chair:** Do you think that students should be paying their full tuition fees if they are getting only partial online learning?

**Nicola Dandridge:** This is such a live question. I touched on it before. Our approach is to require universities and colleges to make all reasonable efforts to make sure that the provision they do provide to students is as good as can be. That is very much our focus. We do acknowledge that of course students have legal rights and they can complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, who has in the past awarded—

**Q275 Chair:** Can I interrupt you, please? You are supposed to be the regulators and we are the politicians. That sounded very much like a politician's answer.

**Nicola Dandridge:** No, it is the nature of our regulatory—

**Q276 Chair:** Yes, but do you think that if they are getting only partial online learning, they should have to pay full fees, yes or no?

**Nicola Dandridge:** I cannot answer that because it is going to depend. I am sorry this is such a mealy-mouthed answer, but it is the correct answer. It is going to depend on what is offered to them and whether that represents a breach of contract relative to their legal rights—

**Q277 Chair:** Will you assess that? Will you be assessing that they are getting the full Monty?



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**Nicola Dandridge:** We are not a court of law. We will approach that by looking at the quality of the university's provision and whether it has demonstrated that it has taken all reasonable steps. That is our role. We are not a court of law.

**Sir Michael Barber:** I hope very much that universities will provide possibly a refined new service that is, to use your words, the full Monty and that the students do get the learning and teaching that they deserve as individuals and that our economy depends on for the future. We should go into this expecting universities to deliver in full.

Q278 **Chair:** Okay. But if they are not and—what we talked about earlier—the lessons are just being dumped online and there is not much interaction, should then the student have to pay for the full £9,000 or whatever?

**Sir Michael Barber:** For the moment, students should be expected to pay as they have because we are in a transition phase and hopefully we can come out of this with the universities—to be fair to them, they have adapted rapidly with the universities providing the full Monty, in your terms.

Q279 **Chair:** Yes, but I am asking about where that is not the case. If it is limited online learning and they are not getting—because they pay for those serious lectures and it is a huge amount of money, as you know, should they be paying that full amount?

**Sir Michael Barber:** By the way, the money is shared between the taxpayer and the institution.

Q280 **Chair:** Absolutely, but this is a big whacking loan to take out.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Yes, but it is not for me to make decisions about that in general. Individual students who do not get the deal can do exactly what Nicola says, they can take it up through the adjudicator and/or through a court of law. That is their right. For the moment, we should go into this with a positive frame of mind that the universities are going to do everything they can and the students are going to get the learning and teaching they need.

Q281 **Chair:** If they are not?

**Sir Michael Barber:** They should complain, as Nicola said.

Q282 **Chair:** Complain to?

**Sir Michael Barber:** To the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which is the correct place to take a complaint, and ultimately to a court of law if they want to.

Q283 **Tom Hunt:** We heard earlier from the first panel that there are calls for further taxpayer funds to be provided to shore up the higher education sector. It is interesting that I have seen some research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies saying that some courses are costing the taxpayer around £35,000. I had also a report from the Policy Exchange stating that



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further Government financial support should be conditional upon certain requirements from the university sector.

Would it be appropriate for the Government to have that approach and to say, if they are going to provide any further financial support, this is taxpayers' money at the end of the day and it is not unreasonable to say there should be some sort of public benefit to that extra support the Government is going to provide?

**Sir Michael Barber:** It is an important question, Tom, for us collectively in the sector, including yourselves of course, to consider. The Treasury is doing a phenomenal job through this crisis in difficult circumstances. Nearly every sector in the country is asking the Treasury for money. At the moment, the package has been put out there. You have seen that. There is ongoing discussion about research money in the ministerial working group that the Treasury is involved in and Nicola is involved in. Then there is the discussion on what to do about universities that run into financial trouble and restructuring, which, as I said earlier, will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. But it is perfectly reasonable, to give a general point in answering your question, if there were to be further Government money, for the Government to attach some conditions to that.

Q284 **Chair:** Okay. Thank you. Anyone else finally? No. Thank you very much, both of you. It is really appreciated. There was a bit of sustained questioning on all kinds of different areas. It is hugely appreciated. Thank you and all your employees and staff, and we wish them every good health and safety at this time. We look forward to working with you over the coming months.

If you could send the Committee in detail what you are doing to help disadvantaged groups and monitor the online education that these students are getting, that would be helpful.

**Nicola Dandridge:** We will do that.

**Sir Michael Barber:** Thank you. It has been a pleasure.

**Nicola Dandridge:** Thank you.

**Chair:** I wish you both well. Thank you.