

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Appointment of the Chair of the Office for Students](#), HC 882

Tuesday 21 February 2017

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Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair); Lucy Frazer; Lilian Greenwood; William Wragg.

Questions 1-41

Witness

I: Sir Michael Barber, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Office for Students

Examination of witness

Sir Michael Barber, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Office for Students

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome to this very important session where we are conducting a pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of the Office for Students, a new organisation to deal with the future of universities. The Government have selected Sir Michael as the chosen person. It is our duty to ask you to answer a few questions and see whether we think you are the right person for this particularly important job. Welcome, Sir Michael, to this Committee today. We are probably going to take about an hour or so to do this, so prepare for that.

I am going to ask the first question, which is: why do you want to be Chair of the Office for Students?

Sir Michael Barber: First of all, Chairman, thank you very much for the opportunity to be in dialogue with you and I am really looking forward to the next hour.

I want to be the Chair because it is a very exciting, important job. The OfS, guided by the Chairman and driven by a chief executive whom we hope to appoint in the near future, has a real opportunity to create a new coherent regulatory framework that can build on the tremendous track record of British higher education. I know it is England specifically, but British higher education is a tremendous success and if we get the regulatory framework right it can continue to thrive, go to new levels and lead the world in a whole range of ways. As we are going through the first set of legislative changes of a major kind for 25 years, I think it is a great opportunity to bring coherence to that, and we can talk about the details.

In my career—you have my CV—I have spent a large part of my time in education, in the Department for Education overseeing the implementation of schools policy. I have been involved in universities as a student, a professor, a member of governing councils. I have been involved in universities in other countries. It is a sector I care passionately about. I should also say I am a patriot. I want Britain to be the best at this and I am very optimistic that the next 10 to 20 years can be really important.

I just want to say one other thing about the role of the Chairman. I think part of the job of a chairman is what I would call a stewardship responsibility. You want to leave the sector better than you found it; you want to leave the OfS in a fantastic state at whatever point that is. It is a four-year appointment. That sense of stewardship is really important because with the higher education sector, when you have this long tradition of tremendous success—Britain has been the leader in this field for many years—you don't want to lose the tradition but you do want to exploit the opportunities for innovation in the next 20 to 30 years. The



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Chairman has to bring a long-term perspective to bear and I think my career suits me well to do that.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. In part you have answered my next question, because I was going to ask you: what are the main qualities that you think you will be bringing to this position?

Sir Michael Barber: Inevitably, as a result of my work, partly in England but also around the world, I have a deep knowledge of how education systems work and when they succeed and when they fail. I have worked in literally dozens and dozens of countries as well as having overseen the big school reform in the early Blair years here in England. I have a deep knowledge of education systems and I have a global perspective. As I say, I have worked in many countries. I have sustained experience of what it takes to deliver outcomes in government, both from my work in the delivery unit in No. 10 in the second Blair term but also the work I currently do with, for example, Canada, New South Wales in Australia or Punjab, Pakistan. I have expertise in government as well as education.

I think, but you should check with other people, that I have a track record of building very constructive relationships with a range of stakeholders. I spent four years in No. 10, when there were sometimes strained relationships between No. 10 and the Treasury, getting on very well with people in the Treasury as well as people in No. 10. My ability to build relationships has been tested and I think I have come through. In this role relationships with stakeholders, whether it is business and government or the sector itself—or indeed UKRI, which no doubt we will come on to later—are going to be a very important part of the Chairman's role. I think I have a track record worthy of consideration for the role anyway.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is really helpful.

Q3 **William Wragg:** Good morning, Sir Michael. You are currently known as the delivery man. How would this influence your approach to being Chairman of the Office for Students?

Sir Michael Barber: Thank you very much for the question and good morning. I think you are quoting a headline from *The Economist*, a review of my book "How to Run a Government". That has eight chapters on exactly that: how to set some priorities, build an organisation, decide your strategy, plan your implementation, build the routines that drive practice. That perspective on how to drive public sector change has to be relevant to this role. I would make one important distinction though. In this role I am not the chief executive and I don't want to be the chief executive. I want to be the Chairman. I want to set the tone, build the relationships, create a vision and try to inspire people, but I also want a chief executive to do the hard yards, build the routines, set up the data systems, manage the organisation day to day. I think "How to Run a Government" is a very good background for setting up any large, new public sector organisation.



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Sometimes implied in the phrase “delivery man” is that all I care about is numbers and bean counting and all of those things. I make no apology for thinking those things are very important but I don’t believe for a minute that is all there is. We need a big vision of what higher education in England could be like in the future and I see it as part of my job to set that.

Q4 William Wragg: Thank you. With that vision in mind, the organisation will be called the Office for Students, and the emphasis I place is on “students”. How would you ensure that students’ interests are at the heart of the system and the vision that you describe?

Sir Michael Barber: You make a very good point. I am sure the title is no accident and the student interest does need to be absolutely at the heart of this. You see how badly that can go wrong if you look at some of the experience recently in the United States. I am familiar with the outgoing Deputy Secretary for Higher Education in the Obama Administration—a guy called Ted Mitchell—who finished on 20 January. He spent just over two years in the Obama Administration basically cleaning up after what he called a lax, messed-up, input-based regulatory system where far too many cheap and cheerful colleges—maybe cheerful originally anyway—got in, ran programmes, got a lot of tax dollars from the federal Government but actually betrayed the students and the taxpayer. It ended up with Ted Mitchell and others having to clean up after them. If you look at the story of Corinthian, it is a story of disaster. In the last year or so they have introduced output-based regulation for career colleges where they focused on the ratio between debt and earnings power after you have left; the higher that ratio the better it was for the college. As a result simply of introducing that measure and making it transparent, 9,000 career college programmes were shut down because they knew they could not effect that ratio in a positive way.

That is what happens if you get the regulatory regime wrong at the beginning. The most important thing you need to do for the students is to make sure that people who either are in the higher education sector or join it have the interests of students at heart. It is about the quality of teaching, the progress that students make while they are at university and where they go, their destination after they leave. If we get that right, that is the most important thing we can do for students. As we go, as we design these things, as we implement the programmes, we need to be in consultation with students, the representative voices of students, and there are many of them. We need to be in dialogue with students at individual universities. We need to recognise that the voice of students is not always just carried by the representative organisations and we will need some people in our governance arrangements who represent that voice and we would take it very seriously.

Q5 William Wragg: You mentioned a very interesting example there in America. With the student interest in mind, is there anything in the English system of universities that needs cleaning up, as you put it?



Sir Michael Barber: I don't know the detail. I know that the Higher Education Funding Council has done a very good job over the last few years of managing the slightly complex regulatory systems at the moment. I may be wrong but as far as I know there is no sort of big Corinthian-style disaster facing us at all. I do think we need a more coherent system for allowing new entrants to come into the market, which is in the interests of students. But we have to set a high bar and have a rigorous process, and we don't want a flood of things as they had in America.

Q6 **Lilian Greenwood:** Good morning, Sir Michael. I want to turn to your experience in higher education. You were a member of the 2010 Browne review, which was very significant and perhaps controversial. Do you think the creation of the OfS is the natural evolution of that piece of work?

Sir Michael Barber: It is a good question. I am a historian by origin and I think when people look back on this phase of history they will see some strong threads moving through, going back to the 2004 reforms as well and even into the late 1990s. The Browne review was set up by Lord Mandelson and went through the 2010 election campaign. It brought about some reforms that the Government then adapted and brought into place that have shown very significant benefits in numbers of students going, the quality of our universities and in narrowing gaps between the most disadvantaged groups and the most advantaged groups. All of that is positive and I do think implied in the Browne review was some kind of reform of the regulatory system. I suppose the short answer to your question is, yes, I do think there is a clear connection between the two.

Q7 **Lilian Greenwood:** Are there any things that you think were missed or have not worked as you had anticipated?

Sir Michael Barber: Overall, I am very positive about the Browne review. The then new coalition Government made some adaptations, so what was actually implemented is significantly different but broadly builds on the Browne review. Overall, I think it has worked out very well indeed. A lot of people predicted at the time that students would be put off coming into the system and that has not been the case. They said that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds would be disadvantaged. That has not been proven to be the case; the opposite has been the case. I must pay tribute to the sector itself and to OFFA and HEFCE. I think they have managed the system well in that time.

Q8 **Lilian Greenwood:** How will the creation of the OfS change the relationship between universities and the Government?

Sir Michael Barber: Let's start from first principles before we come to the OfS. It is fundamentally important that our universities have institutional autonomy and academic freedom. I have seen segments from the current Minister saying how committed he is to those two things and those are fundamental. When the OfS is set up, those two things



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need to be taken as absolutely central pillars of the future of the system. If you compare our system to France, as I have done, or some other countries, those two things make all the difference, so they are vital. In that sense, I don't think there will be any change. We will see what emerges from the debate when the Bill comes back in the Lords but there will be no weakening of those two things. That is fundamental.

Secondly, I think the combining of OFFA's work with HEFCE's work will be a positive because you can embed a real passion for social mobility, access, success and progression from university into the way the entire organisation works. That will be a positive. The dialogue that both the current organisations have had with the sector will be fundamentally important. We need to be absolutely in tune with the sector. I should say from my time on the governing council at Exeter and other governing councils in the past I think it is on the whole very well led and very well administered. The sector has been tremendously professionalised over a 25-year period. I think the dialogue will be fundamentally important.

Q9 Chair: You co-authored a report in 2013 that stated that the traditional multi-purpose university had had its day. What is your vision for the UK HE sector for the future?

Sir Michael Barber: You are right. I published, with a couple of young colleagues, a document called "An Avalanche is Coming". I should say at the beginning—I think it pretty much says this in the introduction—that was a provocation rather than a blueprint. We were trying to generate global debate and I should also say it was not particularly about the UK. It was a global report. As a result, we had lots of debate in Pakistan, Australia, the United States and here with university leaders and it did provoke some serious thinking.

On the assertion that you quoted, if you are a traditional multi-purpose university in one of England's towns or cities and you just tick along as you did in the 1980s and 1990s you will struggle. You have to adapt and look at the improvement of the quality of teaching. You have to build research alliances and an international profile. You have to really focus on improving the quality of teaching. You have to measure the progress that your students are making and where they go. The assertion, while a bit bald, is actually quite right. Those multi-purpose universities do need to change and many of them are indeed doing that. The vision is a university sector where we set up the domestic market so that we can be leading in the global market, our institutions continue to thrive, they continue to punch way above their weight globally in research terms—and that will need debate with UKRI—the quality of teaching improves and that we really crack this relationship between academic standards and employability.

Q10 Lilian Greenwood: I am sure you are aware that the Committee has been doing an investigation into the impacts of leaving the EU on the higher education sector and we have heard from a lot of higher education institutions. Do you think that, and particularly what it means for



universities in the global setting, will impact on the role of Chair of the OfS?

Sir Michael Barber: It will impact on the sector. How it will impact on the sector remains to be seen. The sector led by people like Steve Smith, the Vice-Chancellor at Exeter, is really thinking through how to respond to Brexit. If you look at the numbers of students, there are about 120,000-odd students from the EU in British universities and 320,000-odd undergraduate and graduate students from the rest of the world, so it is about a third of all the international students. Then there are lots of international faculty, some of those from the EU, and there are lots of research partnerships. I don't think there is any reason why all that should be undermined by Brexit but we do have to think through how that would be done.

I think what the Chairman of OfS has to do is to make sure that as we go into the next decade we have a university system that is internationally respected, world leading, recruits academic staff from all over the world based on talent, recruits students from all over the world based on merit, and has fantastic research partnerships with Europe and the rest of the world. That is what my job is. There is a lot of detail with Brexit that I am not on top of but we do need to work our way through it.

Q11 **William Wragg:** Sir Michael, you have been involved in the formation of new organisations and have considerable experience there. How will that experience assist you in the merging of the two organisations, the HEFCE and the OFFA, into one body? How will that experience help with the merger of existing organisations?

Sir Michael Barber: I think any experience of creating new organisations is relevant. I do want to emphasise that I think the OfS should be a new organisation and not just a merger of two existing organisations. We need to set out a vision and a path forward, as I have tried to describe. The experience of merging large organisations—I was going to say bureaucracies, not in any pejorative sense—is important and I have seen that inside Government Departments. I have seen the impact of Government Departments being separated out and brought together. I saw many examples of that while I was in the No. 10 delivery unit; for example the creation of the Ministry of Justice or its predecessor was part of that. There are lots of examples where you see that.

The important thing is to have a vision of what you are trying to build the two organisations into and then be very methodical. I think one of the questions that we will be asking the candidates for chief executive is their experience of this. The Chairman can set the tone and build the culture but the detail really needs to be worked through by the chief executive of OfS in collaboration with OFFA and HEFCE and we will make sure those relationships are outstanding.

Q12 **William Wragg:** Beyond that vision, maybe slightly more vulgar matters. The Government have indicated that the merger would save



somewhere in the region of £16 million to £33 million. Have you identified where those savings might come from?

Sir Michael Barber: I haven't begun to think about the budgets in detail. There are roughly 380 staff in the two organisations and there is a budget of about £27 million for the organisations themselves. I haven't gone into that detail. I have intentionally left some of the detail because my appointment is subject to your confirmation and I don't want to do a lot of work that turns out to be nugatory, so I want to make sure. We will get into the detail. My sense, from conversations with Government and having read some of the debate, is what the Government are trying to do is set up a new generation of regulatory arrangements with the OfS and UKRI and there may be some savings but that this is not the main point. The main point is to seize the opportunities for the next 20 to 30 years.

Q13 **Chair:** Sir Michael, your book "Deliverology"—I think I have pronounced that correctly—argued that campaigns to win over doubters are of limited use, and I must admit I found that during the referendum campaign. There has been a great deal of criticism of OfS within the sector. How do you propose to bring them on board?

Sir Michael Barber: "Deliverology", by the way, was a gentle term of abuse developed by the Treasury to describe delivering it back then. Like any good word like Tory, I just turned it round into a positive, so words that start as terms of abuse can become an asset. "Deliverology" does say that when you get into a negotiation with people be clear what you are trying to achieve, make sure you don't do that thing of making this compromise, that compromise and that compromise and ending up with a not very attractive pudding that does not quite do what you set out to achieve. That is the point that is being made there.

There has been some criticism of the OfS in the Lords debate and elsewhere and I take that criticism very seriously. I think there are a whole series of things that need to be thought through that the noble Lords raised very well: how to think through the Teaching Excellence Framework; how to avoid the OfS being an overbearing regulator; how to make sure that the market is regulated in such a way that good innovative providers get in through a rigorous process but the kind that we were referring to in the US do not get in. Then there is the relationship between the OfS and UKRI that needs to be absolutely linked up. Those seem to me to be the four major criticisms and I see it as my job to resolve those things. I am quite confident that they can all be addressed and I am happy to discuss any of them with you.

Q14 **Chair:** Thank you. One of the key themes that emerged certainly from the House of Lords in the context of this debate is the sense that the OfS has a huge amount of power. How will you set about allaying the fears of those who think that that might be just a bit too much?

Sir Michael Barber: Personally I think that the way the OfS is being set up—and we will see how the Bill comes through—and the way it is



described is very sensible. You are trying for the first time to get a common set of rules to apply to the whole marketplace and to allow new entrants in but only through a rigorous process and only if they pass a high bar. That is what you are trying to do. At the moment it is all a bit haphazard and slightly incoherent, regardless of the best efforts of everybody in the system, just because of the way the law is set up. We can create a new regulatory framework. The traditional institutions that are thriving and doing well have absolutely nothing to fear from the new powers. In fact, this will be a risk-based, proportionate approach to regulation and I hope that many institutions will find that the new regime is a lighter touch than currently.

Then we come to the powers: why are the powers there? One of the lessons of public policy—and I am sure each of you in different ways have seen this—is sometimes you need the powers in the legislation precisely so that you do not have to use them. What you do not want is a kind of disorderly failure. What you want, because you have the powers, is a risk-based process and the information; if you see the early signs of an institution heading for difficulty, intervening early in dialogue quietly, firmly sorting that through. The fact that you have the powers on the statute book enables you to get into a productive dialogue sooner. I have seen this in my past with interventions in local education authorities between 1997 and 2001. If we had not had that power we would not have been able to make the progress we did in, for example, changing the way Hackney education authority or Liverpool education authority was run. If we had not had the power they would not have listened to us, but because we did have the power they did.

Q15 **Chair:** So really a form of deterrence?

Sir Michael Barber: That would be one way of putting it. I think they are powers of last resort now. You might have to use them with new entrants where you are giving probationary opportunities. It is possible somebody will get over the high bar and through the rigorous process and turn out to struggle financially for whatever reasons. In those cases you might well need to use the powers.

Q16 **Lillian Greenwood:** The OfS is explicitly pro-competition. Shouldn't it also promote collaboration?

Sir Michael Barber: Absolutely. There needs to be collaboration and competition in the higher education system for it to succeed. I totally agree that both are very important, but I don't think we will need to actively promote collaboration. HEFCE already does this and I hope we will do this very well. We should be identifying best practices, connecting up ideas across the system, being a place where people can come to think at a level of detail and precision about how to improve teaching quality, not just in general but maybe in particular subjects and particular circumstances. We may be a source of expertise over time on blended learning models where you are combining technology-based learned with traditional teaching, all of those kinds of things. Yes, we would promote



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collaboration but we also actively want to promote competition because that can drive up performance and promote choice because that will give students more options. Using the information that is available—and more of it will be available in the future—they will be able to make decisions about which courses to take and which universities to attend because that will affect their futures. Competition and collaboration absolutely go together.

- Q17 **Lilian Greenwood:** I think you have answered my next question, which was whether good quality teaching and research are underpinned by sharing of information and good practice. I think you have suggested that they are.

Sir Michael Barber: They are. If you approve the Government's recommendation for me to take on this role, I will have to sadly stand aside from the University of Exeter governing council because it would be a conflict of interest. I have learnt a lot about the seriousness with which universities are thinking through how to improve the quality of their teaching and learning. I am the dual assurance lead for education, so I rarely sit through a meeting where we are not saying, "What about X university? How do they do employability or quality of teaching? What are they doing about improving quality in the arts or some particular science?" Exactly that is very important and competition, interestingly, drives effective collaboration. It is a false dichotomy.

- Q18 **Lilian Greenwood:** There is no danger that universities don't share information because they think, "We have got this. Why would we let our competitors have it?"

Sir Michael Barber: There may be some of that, but the competition is driving a search for good ideas. Incidentally, it is also international and global. In Exeter we have debated the way they are thinking about employability at Stanford, for example. I think it has got people looking for best practice in places they might previously not have done.

- Q19 **Lilian Greenwood:** Currently in the UK there are very few private universities but the National Audit Office report in 2014 showed there were high dropout rates and problems with ineligible students' claims. What risks do you think an increase in private providers presents?

Sir Michael Barber: I think there are risks and that is why in answer to William Wragg's question I was pointing to the fairly recent experience in the US. There clearly are some risks of providers who are ineffective or financially unsound or even, in one or two of the cases in the US, blatantly dishonest in what they are claiming to offer students. I am not saying any of that applies to Britain now but I am saying there are risks, so I accept there are risks and those are the risks. That is why I think you have to have a high bar, a rigorous process and not think that we are going to have a flood of new entrants into the market in the near future. This is a job for the long run. As I said in my opening remarks, we are



trying to set up a system that will succeed not just in three years but five, 10, 15, 20 years, so it is getting that process right.

One of the things envisaged by the White Paper and the Bill is probationary degree awarding powers. I think that is a very good way into this. Students will know that a university or a provider has probationary powers so they will know that there is an element of risk for them. The system can see whether that works. The powers that I was discussing with the Chairman are there in reserve if it does not work. It is a much more thought through way of allowing entry into the market than the current system. It will be rigorous and setting a high bar and there will not be a flood of new providers precisely to avoid the risks you are drawing attention to.

- Q20 **Lilian Greenwood:** A slightly different question. I think we all welcome universities' focus on quality of teaching and on being more responsive to students, but there is a danger if universities are competing for students that there is an incentive to provide what students want, which tends to be two ones and firsts, perhaps to sacrifice rigour at the expense of making high levels of contact time or notes or whatever. How do you ensure that quality and academic rigour are not compromised when you are trying to provide what students want?

Sir Michael Barber: It is a very good question and that is something that the OfS will need to pay attention to. I just want to say a couple of things. One is that it is very important for the reputation of British higher education, or higher education UK, around the world that we maintain the rigour, the academic standards and all of that. I travel a lot and that is part of the reputation of British higher education. Collectively, we all have an interest in maintaining those things and not just meeting the short-term needs of some pressures from some students. That is point one.

The second point is I think we can set up a regulatory framework, data systems and evidence bases that demonstrate that we are maintaining those standards. Thirdly, I would say to any student who thinks, "If only I could get a first without trying hard", that that would set them up, that actually they would be being betrayed because what really matters is you are set up for life. Your academic standards and your employability are important. The rigours are in the interests of the individual student as well as the institution and UK higher education.

- Q21 **Chair:** Sir Michael, there is, of course, another regulator in the arena and that is the Competition and Markets Authority. Are you going to interact with that?

Sir Michael Barber: That is a very good question. I will explore what the Competition and Markets Authority looks like. Obviously it looks at the whole of competition and markets in general and we will seek to learn from it. But I should say right away that at this stage I have not given a lot of thought to that institution and we will learn from it.



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Q22 **Chair:** It has already overruled the Independent Adjudicator, so it is clearly going to be interfacing with your activities.

Sir Michael Barber: That is a very good point to which I have given no thought at all yet but I will give it some attention. Thank you.

Q23 **William Wragg:** Moving on now, Sir Michael, to bodies working together, and you have alluded to this in answer to the Chairman earlier. It is about how will the Office for Students work with UK Research and Innovation. It states on the face of the Bill that they have a duty to co-operate. How would that work in practice?

Sir Michael Barber: It is absolutely essential. When I see the governance of the sector from the point of view of, say, a university governing council, the way in which these two organisations interact is going to be fundamentally important. If they were pulling apart or working on different agendas or conflicting agendas it would be disastrous, so that can't happen. I think there are two levels at which we need to think about this, and I have not gone through the details of it. One is the level of personal relationships between chairs, chief executives, management teams, boards. I think John Kingman and Mark Walport will prove to be outstanding appointments for UKRI. They are both people I have interacted with in different ways in the past. I am sure we will find an outstanding chief executive for the OfS.

One thing is the personal relationships at that level in the first instance, but I also think we need to put in place the wiring, the relationship between these two organisations, and not just rely on personal relationships—thinking through how the governing boards interact, what the working arrangements should be day to day—and that is work to be done in the next year with the leadership of the two new organisations. I am very confident that can all be done, but it is absolutely clear they need to be well informed of each other's work for them to understand what is going on as major regulatory changes are being brought forward. They need to be early in consultation. There will need to be formal joint working relationships at the management and leadership level as well as at the governing level and the chairman level. We will put all that wiring in place, but I have not given it a lot of detailed attention yet.

Q24 **William Wragg:** With those two bodies in mind, should universities make a choice between producing high quality research or focusing on the quality of their teaching?

Sir Michael Barber: It would be a very sad outcome if all the universities chose to do one or the other. What we see in some of the best universities in the country is that combination of research and teaching and the teaching itself becomes improved and more inspiring because it is actively doing joint research with leading researchers. Getting research and teaching connected is very important. There may be particular institutions that decide to focus on teaching and employability, for example. We have to remember—and I probably should have



mentioned this—and we all recognise that students are a very diverse group of people. You can be a 45 year-old nurse trying to renew or strengthen your qualifications or a 19 year-old from one of the most disadvantaged wards in the country or a good student from a good school going to a university. We have this enormous diversity of students and of provision of institutions. Some may choose to emphasise on teaching and some may choose to emphasise on research, but I think if they do research and teaching, getting the combination right is very powerful.

- Q25 **William Wragg:** I think previously you have expressed some scepticism about what were described as modest universities. I would be interested to know quite what that description is. Why should they prioritise research if as a result students receive lower quality education?

Sir Michael Barber: In “An Avalanche is Coming” we expressed a challenge to universities that were reluctant to change or adapt. The reason we used the avalanche metaphor is because the one thing you know about an avalanche is that you shouldn’t stand still as it will blow you away. I have lived through an avalanche in the Himalayas, so you don’t want to stand still, basically. That is the point of the metaphor. If universities just sit around hoping that all the challenges of the 21st century will go away, they will get challenged. What we argue in there is that each university needs to think, and actually each faculty within each university needs to think, “What are we special for; what makes us special? Is it the quality of teaching; is it the nature of the teaching; is it the progression of the students; is it our relationship with business; is it the quality of our academic rigour; is it the integration of teaching and research?” There is a range of choices that diverse institutions can make, but what we are saying is don’t just sit around being modest and hoping that all the challenges of the modern world will go away, because they won’t. You have to seize the opportunities of the future.

- Q26 **William Wragg:** Quite a direct question to finish off on: do you think you can have good quality teaching if lecturers are not active researchers?

Sir Michael Barber: Absolutely you can have good teaching. In many of our secondary schools there are wonderful teachers who could be teaching at a higher education level, but I do think that where you can combine teaching and research something very powerful is unlocked.

- Q27 **Chair:** Do you think the Teaching Excellence Framework is a valid way of measuring quality?

Sir Michael Barber: It is an important step forward and potentially powerful innovation, and I am very glad to see that it is being phased in. Last year there was an early experience of it. This year universities, just recently, have submitted their submissions to the Higher Education Funding Council on the Teaching Excellence Framework. I am very glad to see that the way HEFCE have set it up is that they are taking account of a range of data, the National Student Survey, destination data, the submissions from the universities, the published data on progression,



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dropout and all of those things, but then they are not just ticking boxes. They are looking at those data and reaching a rounded judgment. For higher education particularly, regulators need a combination of sophistication and simplicity and I think they are doing that well. We will see how that works and then there is another couple of years before there is any connection between the Teaching Excellence Framework and the fee level. I think it is being very thought through at the moment and that will be a very important instrument for creating the kind of sector that will be able to seize the opportunities over the next 10 years.

Q28 Chair: If we are busy promoting our university sector as world class, top of the league, how many bronze universities should we have?

Sir Michael Barber: I don't think we should set quotas. This is one of the things I checked out in advance of the Committee. There is no intention for there to be quotas of gold, silver and bronze; it is criteria and reference. In theory every university could in time be gold but obviously the reason it is being set up is we want differentiation, we know there are differences, and we want to inform students. It is a powerful tool. Globally I think the thing people need to know is that there is a high floor that every university has to meet before we even get into bronze, silver and gold, so that is what we should be communicating. You can't be a university in Britain unless you meet high standards and then over and above that we are distinguishing between gold, silver and bronze.

Q29 Chair: It is a bit like the Olympics. It is not like a school sack race. It is a real test?

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. You could say everybody is qualified for the final. You can push the metaphor a bit too far.

Chair: I think I just have.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes, we probably have, but nevertheless I am not going to put a number on how many bronze or gold or silver there should be. We will see how that works out. You would hope it should change over time, because part of the point is not just differentiation but incentivising and improving the quality of teaching.

Q30 Chair: The purpose of my question is reflecting the views that I have heard expressed in the university sector about this concept of bronze or even silver.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. I read some of the *Hansard* from the House of Lords debate on Second Reading and the Bill will be reported back to the Lords in the not too distant future. No doubt some of these things will emerge again in the debate and I guess the Government will want to respond to some of that. They are legitimate points to raise and some very serious people who have long track records in the university sector raised some very important points in the Lords and they are worthy of attention. But what we should be saying about UK higher education around the world is, "You can't be a university without meeting a high



floor” and this is information above and beyond that, that all the teaching is of a standard that we would be proud of around the world.

- Q31 **Chair:** Going back to the Teaching Excellence Framework, it is designed to be student-focused but the question arises: how far do you think the National Student Survey should be incorporated into an understanding about the TEF?

Sir Michael Barber: First of all, I am very glad, as we were talking about earlier, that it is a sophisticated process and not a tick-box process. I do think that the National Student Survey is powerful, important data but it is only one source. It is a survey with a track record. It is seen around the world as a very impressive British innovation in higher education. The three governing councils of universities that I have sat on all take that data very seriously indeed. That is a good thing. What I always say about data in any sector in many of the circumstances that I work in is don't rely on one set of data to make big decisions, always look for other sources. If you look at the way HEFCE is doing the Teaching Excellence Framework, they are looking at all those data sources that I mentioned before and then taking a holistic judgment rather than just mechanistically adding up the results of the different surveys.

- Q32 **Chair:** You want to put the student views as part of the TEF. Are you satisfied that there is enough mechanism in place to do that?

Sir Michael Barber: I think the National Student Survey is powerful on that. The area that the universities will have to get into, and the OfS can help in the best practice terms in the way that I was discussing with Lilian a few minutes ago, is that the sector is so diverse, what students are trying to learn is so diverse and the students themselves are so diverse, you don't want to push people down the line of there being one model of good teaching. There is going to be online stuff and traditional stuff, there is going to be tutorial systems, and all of these things are important. Getting to helping the sector develop evidence about which models of teaching seem to work best in which circumstances is really powerful. I think the student survey gets at that but it does not get into the detail of what the pedagogy should be like. That is a good place to get into but not through regulation. It is through sharing of best practice in the way that we were discussing.

- Q33 **Chair:** You have mentioned online courses. To what extent do you still believe that they are the future of teaching in universities?

Sir Michael Barber: I don't and have never believed that they alone are the future of teaching in universities but I do believe they are part of the future and there is a lot of experimentation around the world in this area. If you talk to some almost totally online providers, one of the things managers of those systems will tell you is that the management of the system can really see, because it is all recorded online, the interaction between teacher and student and make some judgments on that, so you



are clearly learning stuff. If you talk to Open University people, they have learnt a lot about how to think about those areas. I think there will be a wide range of different teaching models in universities and students will make choices; many of them can be successful. There will be almost totally online, almost totally without online, and then there will be a range of blended learning models.

By the way, the libraries, for example, are completely transformed. At Exeter the library is open 24 hours a day now and it is as full at 2.00 am as it is at 2.00 pm. You can go to a briefing on the library in a university now and the librarian will barely mention a book. They will be e-mailing you academic articles and will show you all the sources. It is not that the books are not important; it is that books are just one small part of the vast array of information now available. Online is changing universities in dramatic ways.

Chair: I noticed that when I took my own daughter to the library that I used to work in and we did use books—clearly not so much now.

Q34 **Lilian Greenwood:** First of all, were you serious that it is as busy at 2.00 am as it is at 2.00 pm? I think that is a bit frightening. I am not sure it is a good thing

Sir Michael Barber: No, because if you are a Chinese student and your family is awake in China, why not? Why not be e-mailing with them from there? It is not just people working too hard. You probably know that students lead a diverse range of lifestyles. Some of them like to work in the night and sleep during the day. You have to be flexible.

Q35 **Lilian Greenwood:** It is surprising, that is all. I was thinking while you were speaking about the TEF about the potential parallel with Ofsted ratings: “outstanding”, “good” and what was “satisfactory” but is now “requires improvement”. Do you think there are any dangers in making that parallel or other parallels?

Sir Michael Barber: I think any regulator should learn from other regulators and Ofsted is as good a place as any for regulators in higher education to be learning from, but I think the sectors and the institutions are very different. First of all, this is a sector with tremendous success, a track record of success, and we are beginning to see that in the secondary school sector in England too, so it may be getting there. The phrase I used was writing about schools, which I think relates to what you are saying. I am not sure whether Joel Klein, the Chancellor of New York City Schools back then, or myself coined the phrase but we both quote it and attribute it to the other. It is, “You can mandate adequacy but you can’t mandate greatness. It has to be unleashed”. You can set the rules for adequate but you can’t require somebody to be great. You have to create the circumstances in which they become great and that is the job of the OfS. We are regulating a sector that already has tremendous quality and the question is: how do you unleash greatness?

Q36 **Lilian Greenwood:** I want to look forward to once the OfS is in



operation with a general question. How should we judge the performance of the Office for Students over its first year of operation?

Sir Michael Barber: The first year of operation technically is 1 April 2018 to 1 April 2019. Is that the year you are referring to or are you referring to the year between now and it being formally launched?

Lilian Greenwood: You can deal with both if you like.

Sir Michael Barber: Okay. In the very first year before it is formally in place you should judge it on its ability to build the right relationships with key stakeholders. We have talked about the student voice, institutions, UKRI, so that would be one thing. You should judge it on the quality with which the merger that we talked about is done. That should happen effectively, practically, all the nuts and bolts. There is a lot of detail in that that needs to be done well. As I say, the chief executive and his or her management team will oversee that in collaboration with HEFCE and OFFA. I hope it will set out later this year some kind of vision of what the regulatory regime will look like. Those will be the things in this year. I am saying all that before the Bill has even completed its passage so we have to allow respect for the parliamentary process and there may be some changes.

In the first year of actual operation I think the most important thing will be to make that transition seamless. We will have a new vision and be working towards that new vision. We will be thinking about the long run, but in the first year you want the trains to run on time and no great dropped balls or big problems at the transition point and then to begin to get into setting up the new regulatory regime and describing that and maybe the very first phases of the aspects of the new regulatory regime. The TEF that we were talking about before will be an important part in that year.

Ultimately beyond that the OfS should be judged not by what it does as an institution but by what it enables our universities to do for students and employers in this country. The way we set up the domestic market will influence the role of British higher education in the global market and we need to have our eye on that all the way through.

Q37 **Lilian Greenwood:** That leads on to my next question. You have experience of working internationally. You have referred to that during the course of today's hearing. What opportunities do you think there are for UK higher education in the global market?

Sir Michael Barber: Before I answer that, can I say one other thing? The other thing we should absolutely be rigorous about in this preparatory year and the first year is continuing to build on the progress that has been made on access. There is some progress but nobody in the system thinks it is enough. You are two and a half times more likely to get into university if you are from the top quintile than the bottom quintile. There is lots to do on getting into the top institutions, so I want



that to be an absolute passion that will be built into the vision. I should have said that in answer to the previous question.

There are huge opportunities. Britain has some great universities. I think we have four in the top 10, we have 38 in the top 100; it depends which surveys you look at but either way we are over represented. We do about 4% of countries' research but we are 16% roughly of the citations of major works. We have fantastic relationships between our universities and universities in Europe, India, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and so on. We are well set and we need to be driving forward on that and attracting talent and talented staff from all around the world. You can't do big scientific research in a university on its own now. You need research power, alliances, collaboration, so we need to be constantly out in the world.

When the Prime Minister made her speech about Brexit she talked about open Britain, global Britain. This is really important and the universities are a huge part of Britain's ability to relate to the rest of the world. I think there are huge opportunities there because of the reputation we have. As we look at the emergence of global Britain in whatever comes through in all these changes post Brexit, the universities need to be absolutely at the centre of it. Any politician representing Britain abroad needs to be very conscious of the importance of our universities in changing the way people think about us and how our universities can be at the cutting edge of higher education all round the world. I think we can lead the world and the way the OfS is being set up, the Teaching Excellence Framework and all those things will be a very important part of making our universities the best in the world.

Q38 Lilian Greenwood: Coming back to your comment about access, how much difference do you think OfS can bring to bear on access and what other key things could be happening?

Sir Michael Barber: It is a good question. There is a lot to say but the first thing to say is that by building what OFFA has done very well into the new regulator we can make that one of the core values of everything we do. It is not just about access. It is about success: who gets into university, who succeeds at the end of their degree and where do they go after that. If you look through the data you will find that we have made progress but we still have a long way to go. Black and minority ethnic students are getting fewer good degrees than the average. That is a problem that needs to be addressed. Similarly there are issues with destination. There is a lot to do there and you can build it into the DNA of the new regulator. That is point one.

The second is—and I am glad to see that this is a thrust of Government policy because I have believed in it for a long time—building more and deeper relationships between universities and schools will be very important. With my background in school reform, my relationships with head teachers around the country, with the head teacher organisations and so on, I think that is a big opportunity for me to play a part in



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building those connections deeper and more organically than they have been before. There is lots of room to make progress in those two areas.

Q39 **Lilian Greenwood:** There is lots of room for improvement.

Sir Michael Barber: Lots of room for improvement and lots of room to make progress, yes, absolutely.

Q40 **Lilian Greenwood:** A final question. You have said you will remain at post in Pearson until September. How will you manage any conflicts of interest in that crossover period?

Sir Michael Barber: That was what I said to Pearson before I took this role on, but what I have done is agreed to leave on 31 March now, because that rules it out. First of all, you have to approve my appointment but then I am not going to formally start this role until 1 April. I will leave Pearson cleanly before so I don't think there will be any conflict of interest.

Lilian Greenwood: Thank you for that.

Q41 **Chair:** That is all the questions, we have, Sir Michael. Thank you very much for coming before us today and answering our questions as effectively and clearly as you have. Thank you.

Sir Michael Barber: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Chair: We are now going to go into private session to discuss our thoughts. Thank you very much.