

# Education Committee

## Oral evidence: Accountability hearings, HC 262

Wednesday 15 July 2020

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Watch the meeting

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 74 to 129

### Witness

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

Written evidence from witnesses:



## Examination of Witness

Witness: Michelle Donelan MP.

**Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Welcome to our session of the Education Select Committee. I am very pleased that we have a former graduate of the Education Select Committee today—none other than Michelle Donelan, who is now the Minister for Universities and higher education across the board. For the benefit of the tape, do you mind introducing yourself, please, and your title?

**Michelle Donelan:** Yes. Michelle Donelan, Minister for Universities.

Q74 **Chair:** Thank you. Part-time higher education, as you know, is a powerful tool of learning and training for disadvantaged individuals. There has been a huge decline in part-time learning, partly because of the way that part-time learning is funded, including the scrapping of the means-tested course fee grants and tuition loans instead.

The number of adults enrolling in part-time education has fallen by about 70% since 2009-10, something the Open University has expressed great concern about. Is the Government going to reinstate a measure of financial support for disadvantaged part-time students? You could perhaps link this to subjects we know are likely to be in demand in the labour market for the near future. If not, what other measures might you consider to boost part-time learning? What support are you giving to important institutions, like the Open University, which do so much to support part-time learning?

**Michelle Donelan:** Thank you, Robert. It is very strange to be on the other side of the table now. I completely agree with all you have said. I passionately believe that we need to be expanding our part-time offer in this country. I am a great fan of the Open University and the work it does. I was speaking to them, I think it was just last week, once again and hearing about the innovative projects they have and how well they are expanding them.

In terms of our part-time offer, you are quite right to say that it did dramatically decline. It has gone up slightly over the last few years, by over 7,000 from 2016-17 to 2018-19, but there is still a long way to go. Some of the stuff we have introduced is that from 2018 onwards part-time students have been able to access maintenance loans, which is a great help. We have also removed the ELQ restrictions on STEM subjects, to your point about promoting certain subjects.

I do not think it is just about the support available; I actually think it is about the sector itself offering part-time courses that will help individuals to progress, to upskill and to reskill. That is more important now than ever as we have had the Covid pandemic, but also we all know that



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people nowadays may do six careers in one lifetime and there will be an increased demand for these types of courses.

Some of the work I am doing at the moment is looking at the potential for modular learning and how we can expand our part-time offer as part of our response to Augar, which we will be responding to in line with the Spending Review. I call on the sector to invest more in part-time education and in promoting part-time education because it is a powerful tool for social mobility for adults of all ages.

**Q75 Chair:** In the speech, which I thought was important, that you made a week or ago you said, "social mobility isn't about getting more people into university. For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances...Too many have been misled by the expansion of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market."

The IFS recently reported that 13 universities were in serious of danger of going insolvent in the near future. It has not named those universities, as far as I am aware. If they do get into trouble, will the Department be considering a managed restructuring of these institutions rather than a bailout so that they can rebalance their offers towards the skills needs in the economy, in essence fulfilling what you argued for in your speech?

**Michelle Donelan:** Thank you. One of the best ways to protect students is to try to safeguard their institutions from what has happened. It is undeniable that the pandemic has affected the HE sector, just like any other sector, so we introduced a stabilisation package on 4 May. Subsequently BEIS has introduced a package that will help, because one of the key strains on the sector is those that rely heavily on international students because that cross-subsidises research.

In addition, in that 4 May package we also said that we would be launching a restructuring regime that we hope to launch in the imminent future that will provide those further details to institutions. That will be very much a last-resort scenario for an institution that has accessed all the other help available, including the about £700 million that is estimated to be from the OfS in terms of a coronavirus job retention scheme and loans, and they have also benefited from the £2.6 billion that we reprogrammed in terms of tuition fees and so on. It will be last resort and, yes, there will be conditions attached to that funding but further details will be announced on that.

**Q76 Chair:** Will it be focused on meeting the country's skills needs and ensuring, as much as possible, that you have good outcomes for decent wages for graduates and helping disadvantaged students get into higher education?

**Michelle Donelan:** I cannot, obviously, pre-empt a report that is going to come out. What I can say is the driving force behind all of my work and all of the Department's work in the HE sector is to prioritise quality provision that is fit for purpose and that unlocks opportunities for



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individuals that are making, at the end of the day, a massive investment in their future and one that they do want to see pay off in some form or another.

**Q77 Chair:** Pre-Covid data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency showed that HE borrowing rocketed beyond £10.8 billion over 2018-19 as universities sought to attract overseas students by investing billions in refurbishment and expansion. In fact, *The Times* newspaper did a report last year in terms of some of these overseas openings of some of these universities. Have universities been spending on white elephants overseas?

**Michelle Donelan:** Universities are autonomous organisations that have to make decisions in their best interests. They are also global institutions—in fact, they are world leading. I do not think we would want to curtail that in any way because brand “Great Britain” is fantastic, especially in the HE sector.

However, of course universities need to think about value for money. They get a huge investment from students, as I said before, and it is important that money is directed to the best use of that money. I cannot talk to specific examples without having a look at the business case and how it has paid off, but obviously they are individual decisions made by universities themselves.

**Q78 Chair:** We are going to come to degree apprenticeships later. I want to ask you, overall apprenticeship starts—this is something I know you care about, and we went to see the Dyson University, in fact, when you were a member of the Committee—dropped by almost a quarter between 2014-15; the number of level 6 and 7 starts rose from 95 to over 22,479 in the same time.

This is still tiny when compared to students who choose the academic route. We know the number of people completing university degrees rose from 495,325 to 585,010 in the last six years. Disadvantaged students are less likely to access degree apprenticeships than their peers. In 2018-19 just 13% of degree apprentices came from the most deprived areas of England while 27% came from the most advantaged areas.

There was previously a degree apprenticeship fund of about £9.4 million available to boost the supply of new degree apprenticeships. Will the Department consider introducing another round of this fund that helped providers develop internal capacity to offer degree apprenticeships?

**Michelle Donelan:** Thank you. I think degree apprenticeships are a fantastic tool for promoting social mobility. It is disappointing that we do not see enough universities offering them—in fact, only two universities in the Russell Group do.<sup>1</sup> I want to see more of them, especially at that

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<sup>1</sup> The Minister subsequently clarified for the Committee that 17 of the 24 Russell Group universities offer degree apprenticeships. The remaining 7 offer apprenticeships but not up to degree level.



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higher tier as well. We have been working hard to actually put a spotlight on the benefit of apprenticeships in general. We have been removing some of that stigma and stereotypes that has been ingrained in our school system over the years because they are a great tool for social mobility.

In terms of pushing, promoting and incentivising the sector to go down this route, first of all I think we need the sector to do it itself as well. In terms of mechanisms we can use, it will all form part of our response to Augar that will be in line with the Spending Review. You can rest assured that I too agree that degree apprenticeships are fundamentally—

Q79 **Chair:** Could that be strong financial incentives?

**Michelle Donelan:** The sector itself is not actually offering enough degree apprenticeships so if the offer—

Q80 **Chair:** You can make money conditional on that, can you not?

**Michelle Donelan:** There is a range of things that we could be doing to incentivise HE institutions to put these degree apprenticeships on in the first place, to invest the time in fostering relationships with the employers and so on, and also in highlighting the benefit to students. All of this will form our response to Augar. As I said, I am on the same page as you in this regard.

Q81 **Chair:** There is the £800 million Access Fund, for example, which is meant to help students with disadvantaged backgrounds get in to university and it is not clear what the success of that money is. What about using some of that to ensure disadvantaged students do degree apprenticeships, for example, ensuring that OfS works with the universities to use that money for degree apprenticeships?

**Michelle Donelan:** We are considering, as I said, all options at the moment. In essence as well, there are enough degree apprenticeships on offer at the moment in our universities for students to choose them in the first place. Whether they are disadvantaged or advantaged, they need to be there on offer and be a credible offer in the subjects that they want to look at. That needs to be the first port of call as well, incentivising and encouraging the sector to realise that this is part of the future. I want all students to consider these as a credible option.

Q82 **Chair:** What are you doing to enforce the Baker Clause and ensure degree apprenticeships are encouraged in schools?

**Michelle Donelan:** I know my colleague, Nick Gibb, has been working hard on this and it is also an Ofsted requirement, as you know. That is fundamental to making sure that schools recognise and allow access in to these vocational colleges and put a framework around all of the options available. That is something I continue to work on with him, and also with Gillian Keegan, who heads up our careers service for the Department.

Q83 **Chair:** Can I ask about nursing degree apprenticeships? There have been



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about 770 between August 2019 and April 2020. Are you concerned about the decline from 1,040 nursing degree apprenticeship starts in the previous year? What steps are you taking to sweep away the cobwebs of bureaucracy and increase nursing degree apprenticeships and improve completion rates?

**Michelle Donelan:** In terms of nursing in general, I think Covid has shone a light on the amazing work that nurses do. We are anticipating an increase this year in students who want to go into nursing as a profession. Of course the Department of Health has also announced the £5,000 grant for those who are doing courses. There are various routes now that make it easier and accessible.

I agree, we need to be looking at the challenges that face us in terms of apprenticeships, including nursing apprenticeships. That is something I do pick up directly with the Department of Health as this is an area that—

Q84 **Chair:** Do you have any targets, you and the Department of Health, to increase the number of nursing and healthcare degree apprenticeships?

**Michelle Donelan:** The Department for Education does not have a target, I cannot speak for the Department of Health. Obviously we have our manifesto target in order to increase the number of nurses in general and all of these things are feeding into that.

Q85 **Chair:** Finally, for the moment, before I bring in my colleagues, it is welcome that I understand you have said that degree apprenticeships are excluded from student number controls. There is concern that the policy is shaped more by a desire to protect universities than colleges offering HE provision. For example, Harlow College, in my own constituency, has explained that there are disproportionately high costs and burdens of regulations on colleges. Will you consider excluding colleges offering HE provision, like Harlow College, from student number controls as well?

**Michelle Donelan:** We introduced student number controls as a temporary initiative for one year in a direct response to the impact of coronavirus. We saw actions that were putting students at risk by pressurising them. We saw 30,000 unconditional offers made in one week alone, which was in effect pressurising students to make a decision. It was also leaving some institutions extremely vulnerable: if they did not join that momentum of aggressive recruitment, they were going to be potentially suffering extremely financially. We needed a mechanism to stabilise it. This was called for by UUK and the sector in general but it had to be one that worked fairly across the system, so that every offering of HE and HE institutions themselves were applicable to it.

We did exempt apprenticeships because they are different, they are also a job, and those relationships with employers take a long period of time to foster so you cannot go through an aggressive recruitment period with apprenticeships in the same way that you can with degree offerings and HE offerings.



We had to have a fair system and one that is workable. If you start chipping away at that it almost makes the policy null and void. My officials have been dealing with enquiries on this.

Q86 **Chair:** You will at least work with the FE colleges to see what you can do to reduce their burden in terms of this?

**Michelle Donelan:** Yes, every institution that was subject to a student number control got a letter explaining it. They have been invited to come to us if they have queries or concerns, there have been very few in relation to the franchise relationship actually. I will talk to any institution that has any concerns around this.

**Chair:** Thank you.

Q87 **David Simmonds:** Thank you, Chairman. The first question has to some degree been answered. Perhaps taking it out of the frame of reference of Covid for a moment, what do you see as the big challenges and opportunities that are going to face our sector over the next few years?

**Michelle Donelan:** Right; it is a big question. In terms of the challenges and opportunities, they have been obviously changed and shaped by Covid, like every other sector of the economy. There is a pressure this year on our international student numbers if you look at the predictions. That is something I have been working extremely hard to try to mitigate, both in trying to attract international students in and also, if those figures do become a reality, making sure that institutions are protected by working with BEIS. We have the short-term impacts, I guess, on the sector that will be the challenges around coronavirus and the implications that has had for the sector.

It has also provided some opportunities as well for us to take stock and for the sector to take stock and to innovate and diversify—now, that is needed more than ever, I think. We see that in terms of the reliance on income streams but also the fact that the economy will be shaped by Covid and people will be needing to reskill and upskill even more than they were before. That goes back to what I was talking about before. Making sure that HE is much more flexible, we are incentivising part-time learning, we are looking at and promoting degree apprenticeships. There are opportunities from this to improve our HE offering.

From my perspective as well, my key priority is to ensure that we have a high-quality offering, we protect and reinforce our international reputation in that sense, and also that we are delivering for students. I think for too long we have let far too many students down by pushing and promoting courses that do not have that value, do not lead to those graduate outcomes and jobs but at the same time get them into tens of thousands of debt that I just do not think is good enough.

**Chair:** Thank you.

Q88 **David Simmonds:** As a follow-up to that, you touched on in your



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answers to the Chairman's questions quite a bit about the finances of this, but I would like to ask your view—it draws out the point you just finished on there—about the student experience.

Students are now in a position where they are customers, where even 15 or 20 years ago you were sent to university and your relationship with your university was very different. Do you think that creates some significant financial risks for the sector, particularly given the big shift to a lot of online learning virtual courses? They may be delivered by good institutions, but they simply do not offer the student experience, which is what makes university a valuable investment. You have covered a lot of points about Covid and capital risks and so on, I am interested in your perspective on that.

**Michelle Donelan:** The next term will be very different to the last, one because most universities are offering blended learning. Lectures, for example, will in most cases be online whereas tutorials or seminars may be in person. They are not just purely online; they are still getting that part of the experience.

In addition, part of the student experience is also the social life and we have seen the reopening and the unlocking of lockdown, if you like, over the last few weeks that will enable that to be part of the student experience going forward. We have seen a lot of innovation from universities to make sure that online is not dry and limited, but also innovative both on an academic side but also on a social side. They do have that duty and that responsibility to ensure that the welfare of students is looked after. I think the next term will be very different.

One of the things we have said to institutions and sent a very clear message out is that they need to be transparent about what students could expect—before they accepted their offers, in fact. This was also echoed by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and also the OfS, in line with the fact that, as you say, students are in fact customers so they do have consumer rights. We have said institutions, as far as they possibly can, need to be transparent about what they can expect in terms of their student experience.

**David Simmonds:** Thank you. I think that covers the points, Chairman.

**Chair:** Thank you.

Q89 **David Johnston:** Thanks, Chair. First, Michelle, if I can say I very much appreciated you focusing on the students in this because I think they have been forgotten in a lot of the talk about universities recently.

A couple of questions from me. Do you think the measures you are taking, like student number controls and prohibiting conditional-unconditional offers, are going to be enough to both stabilise the sector and also dis-incentivise negative behaviour, or are you reserving the right to take more measures if needed?





**Michelle Donelan:** We are definitely reserving the right to take more measures if needed. I and the Secretary of State have been very clear on how dangerous conditional-unconditional offers are and how we want to see that changed as a policy. The OfS now has its temporary condition of registration, which means it can enforce a fine of up to £500,000 if an institution does act in a way that is in danger of threatening the stability of the sector, and also endangering students in a way. Definitely we are reserving the right to take further action should we need to.

Q90 **David Johnston:** I have been concerned for a few years that some universities have devoted disproportionate attention to getting international students. I think the top 10 for the most international students have an average of 56% of their students who are international—some 60-plus and some 70-plus. They are often the worst universities for widening access to young people at home. I wonder whether you think some of them have become overly reliant on international fee income.

**Michelle Donelan:** We need to remember that international students play a vital role economically, socially and culturally and also in terms of spreading British values around the world. There is no way that I would want our institutions to be in any way more insular looking. I think it is fantastic that we are attracting so many international students and that is testament to how world leading our institutions are.

Of course we need to make sure that universities are diversifying their income streams and they are not overly reliant, which has been highlighted by Covid over last few months. That is more reason than ever before to innovate and to diversify, to do things like more degree apprenticeships and so on and more part-time learning. I certainly would not want us in any way to close our borders to international students. Of course, institutions have a responsibility to our domestic students as well who benefit greatly from studying with international students. I know I certainly did at university and one of my closest friends to date was one in fact, and still is.

Q91 **David Johnston:** Will the Government be saying to some of these universities, "Look, you cannot continue to chase more and more international students and then come to us if there is a fall in those numbers to bail you out" and you might want to look at the business model there?

**Michelle Donelan:** Higher education in this country works as they are all autonomous organisations, as you all know, so they make those decisions themselves. Of course they have to be sustainable and have sustainable models. If any of them have ended up in a restriction regime I am sure they would be conversations that would be had.

The last few months have been hard on the sector. They have known why themselves as well and will want to make sure they are never in that predicament again. At the same time, I still stand by what I said to you:



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international students play an extremely vital role in our economy, our society and our culture. We certainly do not want that to change in any way; we want to continue to welcome them into this country to study.

**Q92 Tom Hunt:** Thank you very much for joining us. I want to say quickly how much I welcomed the speech by the Education Secretary last week. I think it was long overdue, moving away from this arbitrary 50% target, and I think ultimately it is the progressive thing to do as well for improving life chances.

I have a small university in my constituency, the University of Suffolk. There is a nursing school there where I have been and I have visited the student nurses. They have gone above and beyond in the last few months. They have been in our local hospital, Ipswich Hospital, fighting coronavirus on work placements. I think all of my constituents would like to thank them and I have also thanked them directly.

I know you spoke earlier about some of the financial support the Government were providing to student nurses. I was wondering whether the Government are considering looking at tuition fees, and potentially waiving tuition fees, as a thank you to them for all they have done.

**Michelle Donelan:** Thank you, Tom. I completely agree in terms of the work that nurses and nursing students have done in this pandemic. They have stood up and worked completely hard. What we have done is we have said that regardless of whether they have opted in to working on wards or they continued their studies, they will still get their maintenance loans. We also confirmed that they will still get the Learning Support Fund if eligible.

Universities have continued to support them via their hardship funds. Also the time on their placements will continue to form part of their degree courses, which they would have had to do anyway and then, in addition, they have been paid for those as well and they also have NHS pensions. At the end of this they can graduate and go on to be fully-fledged nurses. We are trying to make sure there are no delays in that, working with the Department of Health.

At the moment, there are no plans to reimburse nurses fees in any way.

**Q93 Chair:** I notice you say "at the moment". Does that mean this decision might be under review?

**Michelle Donelan:** No, it just means that there is no policy to do it.

**Chair:** Thank you. Do you have any other questions, Tom, at all?

**Q94 Tom Hunt:** Yes, I have one question. There is going to be a question later on this, I think, but most of the universities will be going back to physical tuition when the new calendar year starts but with some notable exceptions. For example, to my understanding the University of Cambridge has point blank said there will not be any physical lectures for the entire next academic year, and there are some other universities that



have also said for the first term there will not be any physical lectures.

It seems like a very strange decision to me to make that kind of decision at this stage. It seems like it could lead to a deterioration of quality of tuition and how that can conflict with the concerns there already are about some universities focusing too much on research at the expense of actually teaching students. I want to know what the Government's position is on that.

**Chair:** I think Tom raises an important point. In essence, if some universities can offer blended learning—I know Cambridge is doing tuition still face to face—is it really right to say all lectures only will be online?

**Michelle Donelan:** That is the nature of blended: it means some is online and some is in person. Cambridge was misrepresented. Its seminars or tutorials, and equivalent, are going to be in person. It is the mass lectures that are going to be delivered online and that is to prioritise student health, wellbeing and safety, which of course must be paramount. All these things will be constantly reviewed by universities.

As I said before, I think it was important that they announced exactly what it is going to look like for students because students are making a big life-altering decision. In terms of their consumer rights it is important they have that insight into what to expect when universities could offer that, whereas in the last few months they were not able to offer that clarification because obviously things have moved so quickly. It is a blended offering as opposed to nothing at all in most universities, so unlike what was said there.

Q95 **Tom Hunt:** Can I come back on that?

**Chair:** Very briefly, and I will bring in Ian. Thanks.

**Tom Hunt:** It is still unique that the University of Cambridge said all of its lectures are going to be online; they are not going to be physical. A number of students have said that is simply not good enough. I understand the issue around ensuring the safety of students but I think looking at the whole year ahead puts the University of Cambridge in a very strange and unique position. I personally do not agree with what it has done and I think many students will feel very let down by the decision it has made, which is just my penny's worth.

**Michelle Donelan:** Tom, it is not unique, though, because the majority of institutions have opted for that blended offering so that they can ensure the safety of students. According to a number of surveys, that has been at the top of their agenda, wanting that reassurance. Whether it should have made that decision for a year or a term was very much Cambridge's decision to make as an autonomous organisation. We have very much pushed the message that giving clarity to students early is essential because they need to know exactly what they are buying in to.

Q96 **Chair:** We have mentioned Cambridge University. As I understand it, it has asked the Department to facilitate universities' earliest possible



access to the 2020 A-level exam results data. In light of the possible impacts on disadvantaged students of A-level grading, as highlighted in our report that we just published on exams, Cambridge believes that the early release would allow higher education institutions more time to ensure fair processes in their own admissions. Do you agree with that and will you look to release A-level examination results data to HE institutions as early as possible?

**Michelle Donelan:** I think it is important that this year we try to maintain as much normality as we possibly can. We have kept the same date for students getting their A-level results, on 13 August. Now, these calculated grades are the same as any other year, they are a grade that is worth exactly the same, so an institution needs to value that in the same way. Therefore getting them early or getting them on the same day, it is just like any other year in the hands of the Commissioner's process in that sense.

Q97 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you, Chair. On that last point, in terms of students engaging with tuition that is done remotely, as long as that is genuinely a two-way process where the students can engage and ask questions and ask for clarification that does not seem to be too problematical. However, it is a question of how well that is done. That is an observation from my perspective.

In terms of HE providers, they can draw on existing funds to provide particular support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose overall life experience has been impacted by Covid-19. What consideration did the Department give to providing additional funding to support those students via the universities?

**Michelle Donelan:** Thank you, Ian. Students have been affected by Covid in terms of finances, which is undeniable. Most institutions have their own hardship funds in existence already and then they receive money every month for access and participation.

We worked with the OfS to remove the restrictions around that so they could unlock £23 million per month for April, May, June and July—£23 million each—which is a considerable amount of money that they were able to then access to top up their hardship funds. We promoted the use of that for things like assisting with accommodation costs, assisting with technology costs, assisting with connectivity costs, all those things. That has had a fantastic impact in terms of trying to direct that support. I think it was right that we channelled that through universities that had those relationships and could identify those students most in need.

Q98 **Ian Mearns:** That is £23 million per month for four months, is that right?

**Michelle Donelan:** Yes.

Q99 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. What assessment have you made of the consistency and quality of virtual learning and the offer that is being made to students across the country? Particularly in terms of the



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discussion that has just been going on about Cambridge in particular, and other universities across the country, what sort of safeguards or monitoring are we doing to make sure that there is consistency and quality in terms of the tuition being provided to students across the country?

**Michelle Donelan:** Universities had to act extremely quickly in response to the pandemic. We saw some institutions getting their online offering up within 24 hours—UWE, for example. We have seen some fantastic examples of innovation across the sector, including things like practical courses where it is, of course, much more challenging.

I was speaking to RADA a few months ago about the challenges it faces and how it has overcome them. QAA gave guidance on how to facilitate that. I have also worked with professional bodies because, of course, these courses have to then lead to those careers, if they are twinned with such.

We must remember that institutions are regulated by the OfS and it is a regulatory condition that they meet a minimum bar in terms of quality and that has not changed with Covid or without Covid. If a student has concerns what they can do is first of all go to their institution, they should make a complaint and go through the complaints process. After that, if they are still not satisfied, go to the OIA and go through its process, in which case it can be reviewed.

While the OIA cannot make judgments in terms of the academic course, it can look at how much of the course has been facilitated, the measures that the institution has taken, it can look at it in light of consumer rights in terms of any other additional legislation and guidance out there. Therefore there is a process in place if students are concerned. I certainly try to push and promote that to as many students as come in contact with us.

**Q100 Ian Mearns:** There has been some discussion going on across the sector about the commoditisation of university education because of the fees involved and so on. One of the things that I think we are all particularly concerned about is the wellbeing of students. Of course in the lockdown periods students may be suffering from isolation or may be just put to one side.

One of the key issues for students and their parents as they prepare to begin or continue their university education is that wellbeing. There have been a number of tragic suicides among undergraduates in recent times and at last universities seem to be taking this seriously. I am sincerely hoping that student support services will continue to be prioritised, whatever the financial pressures on universities. There has been some talk, because of students working from home, that some helplines may be downgraded or done away with.

There is also a particular concern to young women with the apparent threat to their safety posed by male students, who do not seem to treat



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women students with respect. Recent examples of attacks on women have included the infamous events at Warwick and there has also been an emerging situation at St Andrews in Scotland.

I am wondering around that, have you had any discussions with colleagues in devolved Administrations to make sure that any lessons that have been learned in English universities can be shared with devolved Administrations as well?

**Michelle Donelan:** One of the things I started when I began this role was setting up regular one-to-one calls with my devolved Administration counterparts on a weekly, if not a daily, basis during the peak of Covid. That was to share learnings on all areas. In terms of mental health and student wellbeing, this is one of my own personal priorities. I think it is vitally important.

When you look at the statistics, students are extremely susceptible to mental health issues anyway: you add Covid on top and it compounds and creates further issues. Therefore one of the first things I did at the beginning of the pandemic was write to every institution, reminding them of their responsibility in terms of student welfare and mental health. I said that the expectation of the Government was not that they would just continue what they were currently doing but they would actually enhance it and make sure it transitioned online.

I recently launched, in conjunction with the OfS, Student Space, which is a £3 million additional service designed to sit aside the current mental health stuff that we have to complement it. That covers England and Wales for providers and gives further support. That is especially for this time during Covid and it is to last six months. I think that will have a big impact as well, providing that extra support, because it must be extremely isolating and uncertain at the moment for students.

Q101 **Ian Mearns:** I hope that with counterparts in the devolved Administrations you work together on this issue of particularly safety of female students on campuses as universities begin to return. There have been some quite serious examples of attacks on women and they are not isolated instances, I am afraid.

**Michelle Donelan:** No, and all students should feel safe. I mean that is a fundamental, is it not? It is almost a given that they should feel safe once they are doing their studying. It is something that must be a priority for all institutions.

**Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much.

Q102 **Apsana Begum:** Thank you. In order for students to be well-informed consumers, HE providers need to provide them with a clear idea of what kind of educational experience they are likely to receive from September and beyond. To what extent do providers have the information and guidance they need to set out that offer?



**Michelle Donelan:** Thank you, Apsana. As the Government we produced guidance a few weeks ago that codifies all the bits of guidance that was already out there but also illuminates some more of it so that institutions can make those decisions around how to format their offering and also how to lay out their campuses.

It is important that institutions take those decisions themselves and do their own risk assessments because, as we all know, every institution is slightly different and their set-up is very different but they do need the parameters in order to make those decisions. In addition, UUK—the largest sector body—produced guidance as well, as have a number of the other sector bodies.

There is certainly not a shortage of guidance out there in order for them to make those decisions. I am having regular stakeholder calls every day with both vice chancellors and sector bodies so if there are additional things then we will certainly deal with them.

One of the things that we are looking at potentially producing more guidance on is, of course, the mass movement of students in the autumn term and how institutions can best manage that to make sure that students and staff remain safe.

Q103 **Apsana Begum:** In terms of students feeling assured about getting swift compensation if they lose access to tuition they have paid for, to what extent do all students have access, or equal access, to redress in that area?

**Michelle Donelan:** There is a very clear process in place. Those students first of all need to discuss the problem with their university and, if need be, lodge a formal complaint. If they are not satisfied with the resolution of that formal complaint then they should go to the OIA, which will investigate that as an issue. It will look at exactly what that student was offered and also consider the individual contract that the student had with the university and look at existing legislation and their consumer rights.

That will be done on a case-by-case basis because, as we have discussed during this meeting, universities have acted innovatively and different organisations have had different approaches so a one-size-fits-all would not be appropriate. I think the process that we have in place is a robust one and one that will deliver on an individual student's circumstances.

Q104 **Apsana Begum:** How would you make sure that there is equal access and it will mitigate against those who might have particular circumstances that might make it harder for them to appeal, or get support to appeal and so forth?

**Michelle Donelan:** The OIA published guidance last week, or the week before, on exactly how its process works. It is a simple process. It does not need a legal adviser, if you like, or somebody of that nature. It is open to anybody to be able to go through that process so it is an accessible system for all. It can be done after the event. Of course the



sooner that somebody does it, the better, because obviously it is much fresher in their mind.

**Apsana Begum:** Thank you.

Q105 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Chair. Good morning, Michelle. We have had a lot of witness testimony in the last couple of weeks talking about the widening attainment gap as a result of Covid-19. This will no doubt impact on underrepresented, disadvantaged and black students. How well do you think the higher education sector as a whole is addressing the issue of widening participation in the time of Covid-19 and what more do you think needs to be done?

**Michelle Donelan:** This goes to the point of true social mobility. Social mobility is not just about getting these students to the door of the university and getting them admitted; it is also about making sure that they continue, they complete their course, they get a good grade and it leads to a graduate job.

If we take the disparity between black and white students, for instance, 59.9% of black young people under the age of 19 will go to university—nearly two out of three—and that is remarkably higher than for white students. However, the attainment gap between black and white students is 20% different, which is simply not good enough. For too long we have been getting them as far as the door and then not further on, which is something that we need to be doing more on—with or without Covid, quite frankly.

I think there is a worry around students falling behind in response to Covid. That is why we are doing the catch-up programme that includes mentoring, which offers a good opportunity for graduates graduating this year to get involved with that as well. That has been a key focus of this Government, ensuring that no student is left behind because of Covid or is disadvantaged because of it. In my work on opportunity areas this is certainly a focus of them as well, making sure that we can work with these cohorts of young people who may have been unduly impacted because of the virus.

Q106 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Michelle. My second question was about social mobility, but you have already that question.

However, you did allude earlier on in terms of degree apprenticeships. We heard from young people last week and what they told us was that they were not informed about apprenticeships, they were not guided down the route. I would ask you: what do you think needs to be done to ensure that information about degree apprenticeships is provided to young people more effectively?

**Michelle Donelan:** This needs to be a combination of everybody getting involved in that—schools, colleges and universities. Last week, we announced an additional £32 million into our National Careers Service, which will assist with ensuring that people of all ages get a full picture.





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In addition we do need the sector to go out there and promote these options, first, to give more availability but also to be pushing and promoting. That goes back to the speech that I made the other week about making sure that we are promoting, that the sector is promoting, those courses that do lead to those graduate outcomes and have the best returns. I think it is part and parcel of all of our jobs to be promoting this, both at a school level, college level, and university level, and throughout our society. We have worked hard to remove any of that stigma around apprenticeships and I think—

Q107 **Chair:** Could I come in on that, if you do not mind? At the moment I know the Department has sent letters to schools encouraging, but letters are letters at the end of the day. Should there not be much tougher measures in terms of Ofsted regulations and other mechanisms in terms of the way that schools are examined by the Department as to whether or not they are promoting apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships?

**Michelle Donelan:** It is a legal requirement. It is my understanding that it is within the Ofsted reporting. I know that we are looking at what more we can do to ensure that schools are giving the full picture to our young people. We have been upscaling our National Careers Services to be able to do that in tandem as well.

I will continue to work with my ministerial colleagues, both Minister Keegan and Minister Gibb, on this agenda because it is vitally important. I do think, though, that universities have a role to play here as well in terms of outreach, in terms of providing those role models and that information to their local communities and the schools so that they can highlight to young people what is on offer and where it can lead them.

**Chair:** Kim, do you have any more?

Q108 **Kim Johnson:** One supplementary question, please, Robert. You mentioned in your introduction, Michelle, that 13 universities were looking at insolvency. I have three universities in my constituency. I think there have been issues in terms of the salary rates of some of the VCs in these universities and the disparity between the highest paid and the lowest paid. Do you think there needs to be more regulation in terms of some of those issues around salaries and how people are paid?

**Michelle Donelan:** Yes. Before we set the headlines ablaze, I should say that I did not say there were 13 that were insolvent; I think that was your Chair.

**Chair:** I said that 13 are in serious trouble, in essence.

**Michelle Donelan:** Yes. I have not said that, though.

**Kim Johnson:** Apologies.

**Michelle Donelan:** No, that's all right.



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We constantly monitor the health of institutions in line with the OFS. It is a moving picture as we approach the next term and see what the realities are in terms of students turning up, basically. But in terms of VC pay, institutions are autonomous organisations. However, they do receive a significant amount of public funding and funding from students, so I think vice-chancellors' wages should be justifiable and should not be excessive.

I struggle to understand how we can justify vice-chancellors being paid two or three times the salary of the Prime Minister; I think we do have to question that. We have seen in Covid some examples of universities coming forward and voluntarily making reductions, not just in vice-chancellors' wages, but also senior leadership's wages by up to 30%. I hope to see that continue and be the start of something.

The other thing is that I do agree as well with the recommendations made by the Committee of University Chairs that senior staff should not be sitting on the committee that sets their pay. I think that that is a sensible move forward as well.

**Kim Johnson:** Thanks very much, Michelle. Those are all my questions.

**Chair:** Caroline Johnson. Can we unmute her, please?

Q109 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** A quick supplementary to what Kim asked you earlier on. You talked about the statistics of people entering university. Can you tell me which groups of young people are least likely to go to university and why you think that is and what you are doing to encourage them, please?

**Michelle Donelan:** First of all, we do not necessarily want everybody to go to university. That was very much the essence of the Secretary of State's speech last week, and certainly whether you are advantaged or disadvantaged, HE is not necessarily the best route to get where you want to go in life. In fact, I want to see a system that promotes what the individual's needs are and the individual's desires in terms of their progression. There are a number of issues around different groups getting to university. For example, the stats show white students who have been on free school meals find it hard to get to university.

However, as I said at the beginning, I think we need to move away from this focus of how many students get to university, because it is such a blunt instrument. It is not very accurate in terms of social mobility because if a student gets to university and then drops out after year 1 and has a year's debt, what does that achieve for their social mobility? Nothing. In fact, it sets them back in life. It is about them completing high quality, academically rigorous courses that then lead to graduate jobs.

That is the important measure that we should be looking at, and in addition looking at those going on apprenticeship routes or vocational training, which often produce better social mobility outcomes than degrees in certain careers in certain fields.



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I think we can be much too blunt, looking at these statistics. We can almost pat ourselves on the back by saying, "Isn't it fantastic now because we have record numbers of disadvantaged students going to universities?" Yes, we do, but are those students completing their courses and are they leading to graduate jobs, when 20% of students do not see a return on their investment? Although we—

**Q110 Chair:** Just over 12% get into the—sorry. The disadvantaged English pupils are less likely to get places at the higher tariff institutions than the most advantaged pupils.

**Michelle Donelan:** Exactly.

**Chair:** The whole system is skewed. It seems to be based on quantity over quality.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** I think that—

**Chair:** Carry on.

**Michelle Donelan:** No, Caroline can go.

**Q111 Dr Caroline Johnson:** I was not intending to say any more, I was just listening to your answer, but the question was which groups are currently least likely to go to university. Is there much talk about helping those groups that are least likely to consider it as a career, notwithstanding the fact that we want to encourage them in all different types of careers? Which groups are the least likely to go to university and what is being done to support them in considering it as an option and in achieving that aim, where they have the capability to do so?

**Michelle Donelan:** The point I was making is that we do have record numbers of disadvantaged students going to university. There are still challenges within different sections of society, including white working class students, but I do not think it is a good measure to look at anyway. It is the wrong question, if you don't mind me saying, because it does not matter about looking at which groups do not get to university, it is about making sure that those groups that do go complete, that they lead to graduate jobs, but also looking at what is in that student's best interests.

We need to move away from targets, such as the 50% going to university. It should be much more focused on the individual and unlocking social mobility—but true social mobility, not box ticking and target-driven social mobility that makes us feel good. I mean social mobility that leads to life chances being improved for these individuals.

**Q112 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Does that mean no university will be required to have a target of any particular demographic of student?

**Michelle Donelan:** We have access and participation plans that have been launched for the next five years that they are working towards. They are individually accountable to the OfS on those and going through them and trying to work towards challenging their individual parameters that they have problems with, so certain ones will have different issues in



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terms of different demographics. But the important thing is that they are open, they are accessible and they are doing outreach as well and trying to lift the quality bar in schools, rather than simply trying to tick quotas. That is not social mobility.

Social mobility is making sure that they are going into those schools, like we have seen with the maths schools—trying to raise the bar, trying to lift the quality and also trying to provide those role models and getting students through the door, but then continuing on that journey, because access and participation is not just about getting the student in, it is about ensuring that they can complete their course, get a good grade and then that can lead to a graduate job. It is much more about the journey than simply how many they get in in one year.

**Q113 Chair:** In a nutshell though, what are you doing—given everything you have said, which I agree with—to try to make this a reality, so that the Office for Students is helping to make it happen as well, that we make universities a place for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who stay, and who get skilled jobs at the end?

**Michelle Donelan:** The access and participation plans have made a big difference. They have made the sector focus on this area, but there is a long way to go and I think we need the sector to also recognise that as well, to look at the courses they offer, and look at the courses they promote. For too long, as I said before, we have promoted courses that do not lead to those graduate routes, and disadvantaged students are much more susceptible to those messages.

**Q114 Chair:** But a lot of those plans are about inputs rather than outputs.

**Michelle Donelan:** Yes. What I am saying is we need the sector to look at their offerings, at what they are promoting, and their messages to prospective students, because they do tend to promote courses too much that do not offer those graduate outcomes. As we look at our response to Augar and we look at promoting high quality and social mobility, these will all be the things that feed into that and you can expect further initiatives to be announced that will enable us to carry on this journey.

**Q115 Tom Hunt:** I do have a question, but first, very quickly, before this meeting today my understanding was that the University of Cambridge was unique in moving its entire lecture programme online for the entire academic year. Are you aware of any other examples of universities that have done that—have moved every single lecture for the upcoming year online? I am talking about lectures specifically.

My main question is about the specialist maths schools that you mentioned. How could some of the good things that have happened in these specialist maths schools be recreated in other subject areas?

**Michelle Donelan:** In terms of their blended offering, what I am saying is they are not unique in the fact that they are doing a blended offering, so some of it is online and some of it is in person, which is the general



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theme of what has happened and what has been announced by institutions. The majority have not announced for the entire year, that is fair to say. However, Cambridge has made that decision as an autonomous organisation that it wants to give clarity over the whole year.

The second part of your question about maths schools—they have produced some fantastic results and there are other areas indeed that we could look at that in. They have relied on partnerships between universities and schools and that is something that I spoke about the other week as being important in helping raise the quality, so almost getting in there a lot earlier in terms of the journey for students.

**Chair:** Christian, I know we have done a lot on apprenticeships. I know you are going to ask about one or two other things, but do you have any further questions on apprentices at all?

Q116 **Christian Wakeford:** Obviously, the whole point of apprenticeships now is to play a part in the levelling-up agenda. To what extent do you think the education sector can best support that levelling-up process?

**Michelle Donelan:** I think the higher education sector has an instrumental role to play in levelling up, in making sure that courses are high quality and do lead to graduate outcomes and that it is offering a suite of courses that are in line with our labour market needs and our schools' needs. Its role is also going down the road much more of things like degree apprenticeships, and making sure as well that they enhance and increase their outreach work, as I spoke about before in terms of role models and so on, and raising the quality of the bar for students at an earlier age to be able to unlock opportunities such as HE or FE or apprenticeships.

Q117 **Christian Wakeford:** For all those sectors where there are mass redundancies and potentially the collapse of the entire sector, to what extent do you think that apprenticeships can be a way out of redundancies, working in a retraining and reskilling agenda to get our workforce back out, reskilled, retrained and working in a sector, as you were just saying, which is suitable to our labour-market needs moving forward?

**Michelle Donelan:** Apprenticeships are a fantastic way to achieve that because you are earning and learning at the same time. We saw the announcement the other week in terms of the boost to enable more apprenticeships and also to support young people into apprenticeships at this very difficult time. I think that they will be proving instrumental to our recovery and to the social mobility opportunities for young people and older people as they look to upskill, reskill and move into careers.

**Chair:** Did you have something else you wanted to ask, Christian? You mentioned them earlier.

Q118 **Christian Wakeford:** Yes, in the meeting earlier, and it was very much



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about diversity in universities. I have seen a copy of a letter from Nottingham University suggesting that some lectures and seminars could be moving towards Fridays and Saturdays, which obviously for some of our ethnic minorities could cause particular issues. I am thinking in particular about any clashes with either Friday prayers or Shabbos. Is the Department doing anything to try to mitigate this issue so our ethnic minorities do not have a detrimental impact to their education, having already had a detrimental impact during Covid?

**Michelle Donelan:** While all of our institutions are autonomous and they will set their own timetables and the like, they obviously have to abide by equalities legislation and put students and students' needs first. I have made that very clear in all my conversations and correspondence with institutions because regardless of Covid, they need to make sure that they are able to offer that service to students and that students are not discriminated against in any way inadvertently or the like because of their religion or their ethnicity, et cetera. I would urge all institutions to make sure that they continue to prioritise and promote student education and welfare and consider those other factors that may be at play when designing things such as course timetables.

**Chair:** Does any other member have any other questions they would like to ask first? I have a few more. Ian Mearns, you go first and I will have some at the end.

Q119 **Ian Mearns:** Thanks, Rob. With regard to degree level apprenticeships, Michelle, there is a danger that they will turn into a patchwork quilt with particular specialisms and particular universities being involved, but it is not likely to be uniform across the country. In some areas there might not be any real access to degree level apprenticeships at all. Has the Department been giving any thought to having a national accreditation and validation system for degree level apprenticeships rather than it being done by individual universities?

**Michelle Donelan:** The way that they work, as you know, is with employers, so there will be variations per region and that will be quite right as well, because they have to have that job element. But I believe that you heard from the Open University and how it is launching more of a remote degree apprenticeship, so it can be possible. It is something that does need innovation and thought. That goes back to my point about wanting the sector to explore this much more.

Q120 **Chair:** You mentioned that just two Russell Group universities do degree apprenticeships. Should you not be doing more to make more universities adopt them and work with businesses? Cambridge University fortunately has now opened the door to post-graduate degree apprentices, which is very important. Don't you think that Oxford University should do degree apprenticeships to set an example?

**Michelle Donelan:** I would like to see every institution offering degree apprenticeships, if I am honest. I do think not enough universities offer degree apprenticeships. This is something that we are looking at, as to



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how we can incentivise and encourage them to do more so. We will be continuing to look at this and it will form part of our response to Augar later on in the year.

**Q121 Chair:** Will you write to these universities to try to persuade them to do that and help them along the way?

**Michelle Donelan:** I certainly can, but I would like to do a bit more than write a letter. I think we do need some action and some incentives and encouragement to ensure that we can expand the offering of degree apprenticeships.

**Q122 Tom Hunt:** I am very concerned about the mental health of students, particularly fresher students. I remember when I went to university for the first time. I left my home and I was in a different place, in a different city and it was hard enough as it was. One of the things that made it easier was socialising with other people in the same boat, so I am thinking of a lot of these people starting university for the first time, not being able to do that, all these restrictions and limitations on how they can socialise et cetera, whether they are in physical lectures. I would like a focus from the Government on that, because it does concern me—students' mental health and particularly the first-year students.

**Michelle Donelan:** Mental health in the HE sector is a key concern of mine and it was before Covid. It is something that we need to do more on. As I said before, we have launched Student Space in conjunction with the OFS, which is £3 million of additional support delivered by Student Minds, which is to coincide with the existing mental health support. In addition, the Department of Health announced £5 million that students can access as well.

As we unlock society, students will be able to socialise much more, as we saw the other week with the opening up of pubs and restaurants, but of course we have to be mindful of the fact that it is a very different world we are living in at the moment, and that adds additional pressures and additional constraints on students. I will continue to reiterate to universities that mental health needs to be a priority and they need to be extremely vigilant in this area. They certainly have been so and that is certainly the message I have had from UUK—they also are mindful that this is a key concern.

**Q123 Chair:** We have been approached by some different religious groups about extremism at university, after several requests to Ministers for universities to adopt the IHRA definition. Do you know how many universities have done so and what steps are you taking to accelerate the adoption of the IHRA?

**Michelle Donelan:** I do not have the exact number to hand at the moment, but I can certainly write to the Committee with that. I know my predecessor wrote to all institutions encouraging them to adopt the IHRA and I can certainly do that as well. We want to see freedom of speech,



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freedom of expression on all of our campuses, but in a way that obviously does not cause any form of racial abuse, harassment or abuse of religion.

Q124 **Chair:** That is very helpful. We had Jewish students also approach us saying they are worried that their freedom of speech on campus has become inhibited by threats of protests against their events. For example, speakers that attract protests have attracted counter-protests, which sometimes cause safety concerns for the students attending the events.

As a result of instances, some universities have blocked the events from these Jewish groups with speakers deemed controversial, unless prohibitive security costs are covered by the student organisers. The University of Lancaster asked for £1,500. Obviously student groups do not have this kind of money and your predecessor said that these costs could amount to indirect discrimination. What are you doing to ensure prohibitive security costs are not used as a means to deny freedom of speech on campus?

**Michelle Donelan:** I think freedom of speech is an extremely important issue. We have seen the issues around this rising and I am sure we have all read about it in the press in terms of no platforming and the chilling effect that we have seen. But let us be clear: there is a legal obligation for all institutions to ensure that freedom of speech and expression is there.

We have sent out a very clear message that, unless universities are making sure they adhere by those laws, we will have to intervene and go further and we are not excluding legislative change in order to achieve that, because this is one of our top priorities. We can only have academic rigour and academic freedom of expression et cetera if we can have freedom of speech. It is a human right as well, and we are certainly not going to let certain groups or certain religious groups be silenced by any form or another. We are looking at what more we can do on this and we are not excluding legislation.

Q125 **Chair:** You are probably aware that *The Times* newspaper has been doing a number of investigative reports suggesting that some universities give academic status to proponents of conspiracy theories. There has been an academic in a Russell Group university who has a history of proposing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in his lectures. What are you doing to engage with universities on these issues following the report in *The Times* and do you believe that academic freedom extends the promotion of racist conspiracy theories? What do you see as a responsible approach from institutions to these kinds of issues that are coming up and being consistently reported on?

**Michelle Donelan:** Of course freedom of speech is protected in law, but so is making sure that we do not encourage harassment or violence or any other inadvertent consequences. We obviously have our Prevent duty as well, which is applicable to universities.





As autonomous organisations, universities do need to be responsible for these areas and any reports that I get of incidences I certainly do look into. It is important that we do not just go off the headline, because there is often a lot more to it than the headlines lead us to believe. It is about striking the balance, about protecting freedom of speech, while also protecting religions and protecting different minority groups from abuse and from discrimination, but universities should be able to ensure that that happens, just as any business or any other organisation in society would be making sure that we get that balance right.

Q126 **Chair:** Finally, on social distancing, have you given consideration to guidance around activities on campus such as catering, freshers' weeks and what are the expectations if one student living in communal accommodation becomes ill and so forth? I am talking about the autumn return.

**Michelle Donelan:** We have produced the guidance that came out a few weeks ago, which is helping to inform institutions looking at reopening their campuses. That is in line with all the Public Health England guidance and the social distancing requirements and it does give further information on what should happen if a student falls ill and how they would quarantine et cetera, so the universities have those tools to be able to apply those decisions and make those plans in preparation for autumn.

Of course, these are all subject to review. As we all know, the virus could change or the situation could change and we have seen that with local lockdowns et cetera, so we will continue to be responsive to that and produce further guidance or update the guidance should we need to.

**Chair:** Thank you. Any final thing from any other colleague? Ian Mearns. Kim, did you have a question? Kim as well. Ian and Kim, please.

Q127 **Ian Mearns:** Michelle, during the session we have talked about the issue of social mobility, but I must admit I am kind of struggling to understand what the model of social mobility that you would like to see looks like. I am wondering if you could write to us to flesh that out, because it seems like the idea of social mobility works for individuals, but it does not work for groups particularly. I wonder how we square that circle.

**Michelle Donelan:** The point I was trying to make is that there has been too much emphasis on getting students to the door of universities and not enough on completion rates and graduate outcomes. Too many students have been let down by courses that do not meet labour market demands. That is certainly not social mobility. Getting a disadvantaged child or a child from an ethnic minority group to university is certainly not social mobility. It is about what happens after that. It is about life chances and opportunity throughout and unlocking those possibilities, but I can certainly write to elaborate.

Q128 **Ian Mearns:** You have talked about the routes to success other than a university degree, but you are not going to be Permanent Secretary at



the DfE without a degree, are you?

**Michelle Donelan:** I certainly know a number of people who are successful in life without degrees and a number of MPs and Ministers without degrees, in fact. I think that we should be highlighting that there are other routes to getting a degree than the conventional way.

We have talked a lot about degree apprenticeships and it is about focusing on what is right for certain individuals and the career path that they want to take, should they know at that time, or the subject area that they want to take. A one-size-fits-all model does not help anybody at all.

Q129 **Kim Johnson:** Michelle, I want to touch on the issue that Tom and Apsana have raised about the increase in mental health provisions for students on campuses. I know from the students in my constituency that a number of support staff available that would ordinarily support new students on campuses have been removed. I think this is having an impact, increasing levels of mental health problems for students.

I want to know if, when we are doing assessments of universities, the number of support staff to support the transition for new students into campus life should be looked at.

**Michelle Donelan:** There are different ways to support student mental health. As you point out, the transition can be one area that students can find the most challenging—also when they are doing their finals or at different parts in their academic journey—so it is important that they are supported throughout. As I said, at the beginning of the pandemic I wrote to institutions reminding them of their responsibility on mental health and saying that the Government want them to promote that as a priority. I will continue to get that message out there.

If there are institutions where there are specific concerns on this area or any other area, I am more than happy to pick up the phone. While institutions are autonomous, I see my role very much as having that direct relationship with institutions and finding out what is happening on the ground and seeing what more, as a Government, we can be doing to support them to support students.

**Kim Johnson:** Thank you so much, Michelle, for that offer of support. I will be contacting you.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, Michelle.

Clearly, the Committee is very keen on degree apprenticeships and I hope that, when you build on your speech with future work, you set out in nuts-and-bolts terms how we can get many more of them. Particularly in respect of what you said about social mobility, what happens at the end, not just inputs, is important as well. I wish you luck and every good wish as you do your work. Thank you, everybody.