

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Value for money in higher education](#),
HC 343

Tuesday 27 March 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on Tuesday 27 March 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Michelle Donelan; Emma Hardy; Trudy Harrison; Ian Mearns; Thelma Walker; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 208 - 314

Witnesses

[I](#): Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Chair, independent review of higher education funding and student finance arrangements in Wales, Professor Anna Vignoles, Professor of Education and Director of Research, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and Stuart Cannell, member of the student panel, Office for Students.

[II](#): Sir Michael Barber, Chair, Office for Students.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Office for Students](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Professor Anna Vignoles and Stuart Cannell.

Q208 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much for coming today. For the benefit of the tape, could I please ask you, from our left to right, to identify yourselves and your position?

Professor Diamond: I am Ian Diamond and I am Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Aberdeen.

Stuart Cannell: I am Stuart Cannell, a panel member in the Office for Students student panel.

Professor Vignoles: I am Anna Vignoles, a professor of education at the University of Cambridge.

Chair: Thank you. Before I come to William Wragg, can I begin by saying how delighted I am that Cambridge University is now going to introduce a form of degree apprenticeships, which I think is a really important move and will boost the prestige of apprentices or create a cascade effect? I wish that Oxford University would follow your example. On behalf of the Committee, I think it is a brilliant decision for your university.

Q209 **Mr Wragg:** Good morning, everyone. My question is for Sir Ian first. What lessons can the recently launched English review of post-18 funding learn from the review that you conducted in Wales?

Professor Diamond: That is a very good question, and thank you very much for it. I would say there are a number of things, the first of which was that we coalesced right across the political spectrum and right across the stakeholders—students, staff, universities themselves and employers—and we did so around a set of principles. My starting point would be to say very clearly that, first, you need a set of principles and, secondly, those principles should cover the system of higher education. To be very clear, that also includes the flows-through from further education. The second point I would make, which I think is incredibly important, is that right at the beginning the review recognised the holistic costs to the individual of higher education.

Having said at the beginning that higher education was both a public and an individual good and should therefore be a partnership between the individual and the state, we recognise that to the individual the costs of higher education were not just the fees but the fact that you also had to pay rent, buy food and so on. That is incredibly important, because if one is going to benefit fully from higher education—and let's be clear that higher education is about not only what you learn in the classroom but growing as an active citizen outside the classroom—one needs to be able properly to benefit from it. If you are working in a supermarket or somewhere else for large amounts of time in order to pay rent and buy food, then quite simply you cannot benefit fully. That is why we moved to



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a system that provided state support, particularly through a maintenance grant, which did not support only those from the poorest backgrounds but also from what is—

Chair: Can I interject? As we have a short session, can you answer as concisely as possible?

Q210 **Mr Wragg:** I am grateful for that, Sir Ian, and you have answered my second question in the focus there. Your review did propose a system that covers all types of students, as you alluded to at the end of your answer. What challenges did you face during the review process?

Professor Diamond: The challenges were to find a way that supported part-time education in a way that would encourage people to invest in part-time education, and in finding a system that would gain support right across the stakeholder spectrum.

Q211 **Mr Wragg:** The Chair opened with remarks on degree apprenticeships. What role do you see degree apprenticeships playing in higher education in Wales?

Professor Diamond: I think they have enormous opportunities because, very simply, they enable employers to have an input into the skills that they require, but let us remember that a degree is more than just skills; it is an education, and that is incredibly important. Secondly, they enable people to earn while they learn, which is also incredibly important. That brings with it, I would submit, a requirement on the provider to be able to provide the education in a way that is commensurate with earning while you learn.

Q212 **Chair:** Would you like to see a situation in which you had, say, 50% plus of students doing degree apprenticeships, given what you have just said?

Professor Diamond: I would not want to put a number in any way whatsoever into that. I do think there are advantages to increasing the numbers of degree apprenticeships. Equally, there are huge advantages to a standard university degree. Let us also remember that large numbers of degrees, very rightly—particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences—do not have a flight path to a particular career. We have enormous numbers of people doing degrees in history. That is absolutely brilliant. They come out with an enormous number of skills that lead them into careers all over the place. Very few of them become historians. I would want to maintain that possibility rather than the flight path where you start a career and learn at the same time.

Q213 **Trudy Harrison:** What should the Government's review post-18 focus on? What should the focus be?

Professor Diamond: Were I to be part of it, I would be asking it, as I said at the beginning of my first response, to cover a system of higher education. That then allows you to address things such as the flow-through from further education into higher education, the question you



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rightly asked about degree apprenticeships, as well as the role of research and the interaction between research and teaching, and the role of research and teaching leading in to translation for the economy. It seems to me that we should be looking at the whole system, rather than just bits of it.

Stuart Cannell: I agree with everything that Sir Ian has said. It is not just about having access and getting into university; it is about financial support that enables you to benefit from it more fully. The evidence you have seen shows that disadvantaged students need that support more. I hope that the review looks at that in great detail, and also at whether the tuition fees are at the appropriate level at which they should be charged.

Professor Vignoles: I would like to add two points. The first is that, given global trends on the size of higher education, we are following the global trend of expanding tertiary education. The question is not about the size of our tertiary sector so much as about the optimal mix between more vocationally oriented routes and academically oriented routes, and the different subject mixes. I think it would be crucial for the review to understand the routes that students take into higher education, why they make the subject choices that they make, and the role of institutional incentives and funding arrangements that drive the shape of our higher education sector in ways that perhaps we did not anticipate.

I suspect that we do not want to go down the pure manpower planning route, given the historical failures when we have tried to do that. However, we do need to be more aware of the way that we set up our funding systems and our incentives in schools and higher education having a very strong influence on the kinds of provisions that students then take up in tertiary.

Q214 **Trudy Harrison:** As the review will not make recommendations related to the terms of the pre-2012 loans or to taxation, do you feel that its potential to reform the current system is limited?

Professor Diamond: It is allowed to make recommendations across the piece. I think you would want to make a broad set of recommendations. Whether or not they were accepted is a political decision.

Q215 **Thelma Walker:** Thinking about FE students, particularly from a low-income background, how do you think we can make it possible for those students to have a real choice when it comes to apprenticeships or taking on a degree in higher education? How can this review and its recommendations make it a real choice for those students?

Professor Diamond: Before I answer, can I declare an interest? I am the Chair of Edinburgh College of Further Education. That must influence my response, because I absolutely agree. FE, in my opinion, has an enormous role in allowing people to go on a route into higher education through, if you like, the local college, which enables them perhaps not to have to make an enormous leap initially. That is incredibly important.



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Therefore, that route has to be a smooth one. Too often people from further education, when they try to transfer and articulate into higher education, cannot do so with full credit. We need to make sure that we have a culture in which further education institutions and higher education institutions work closely together to enable that easy flow-through.

For me, one of the best examples of good practice is the link between Forth Valley College in Falkirk and Sterling University, whereby the FE students, while on their HND courses, spend a day a week in the university being taught, so that the transition is great. Too often the transition is either enormous or they are required to go back and do things they have already done, and that cannot be right.

Q216 **Thelma Walker:** Do you think the fact that FE has been starved of funds is an obstacle to giving students that support in that transition?

Professor Diamond: I think we need to recognise that you need to spend an enormous amount of money on widening access. I am trying to change from saying “widening access” to saying “widening achievement” because that, to me, is critical. Let us recognise that English universities in 2015-16 spent over £700 million on widening access. It costs a lot of money and I am very clear in my mind that FE needs to have the money to be able to do this absolutely properly.

Stuart Cannell: I have a few other points to add. This is also about the advice and guidance that FE students receive to enable them to make an informed choice. It is absolutely fundamental that the review should take account of that. It is also about taking away any potential stigma around degree apprenticeships. Whenever students or applicants get into higher education, it is about giving them sufficient academic support to enable that transition to be as smooth as possible.

Professor Vignoles: I think in the same way that we need to think about how students come from FE into HE—and I completely agree with the previous comments—we also need to think about how students end up in FE and, in particular, the routes that students from low-income backgrounds tend to take. We are talking about the situation in which we are looking at them as they arrive aged 18, but we need to go earlier than that.

Their choices at school are very constrained. The funding per student between 16 and 18 in the FE sector is far lower and that will impact on achievement. That means we are not talking about a level playing field. Add to that the evidence we have that some types of students are more risk averse than others on taking on loans and debt. We need to think about the pathway from 14 right the way through for a poor student and understand the barriers they face.

Q217 **Chair:** Isn't that pathway that we were asking about an apprenticeship, and for, say, Cambridge University—you are maybe doing it already—to



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work very closely with your local FE colleges to work through that pathway? They start off with lower level apprenticeships and then possibly move up to degree apprenticeships.

Professor Vignoles: We need also to have a sense of the scale of the apprenticeship programme and the importance of non-apprenticeship activity in FE, which is huge. I do not think we should ignore the non-apprenticeship component, because if you look in detail you will find that the lower SES—socioeconomic status—students will be predominantly FE, not on an apprenticeship route, for example. We need to think about the transitions that they would make, whether that is into more FE or into HE.

Q218 **Chair:** Some 25% of apprentices come from the poorest fifth of areas, so it is an incredible ladder, education and/or opportunity, for apprentices to climb.

Professor Diamond: It is a ladder, but it needs to be more than that. I agree with everything that Professor Vignoles has said. Could I add one further word: aspiration? We use “low income” as a proxy for many things, some of which could be first generation into tertiary education. Therefore, we need to raise aspiration. I was recently in a school in a very poor part of Aberdeen, and a young woman came up to me and said, “I really, really, really want to do law, but can someone like me do law?” She was going to get great school results. It was about saying, “Absolutely, and we have to make you clear that this is a possibility.” That comes back again to something that has been lost right across the UK—not lost but reduced—which is careers advice.

Q219 **Thelma Walker:** I was about to say that. Are we saying, then, that to achieve this successful transition we need upskilling of staff at every phase to be able to signpost and advise?

Professor Diamond: I could not agree more.

Professor Vignoles: We also need to have better information for the staff who are doing careers guidance. That sounds like an obvious point, but the world is changing very quickly. The vocational system is subject to constant change. Trying to stay on top of that to guide students is an incredibly difficult task, so it is very important that we have that information.

Q220 **Thelma Walker:** We need to invest in that focus?

Professor Vignoles: Yes.

Q221 **Emma Hardy:** Going back to the point about aspiration. You say aspiration and I think a lot of it is more confidence. What I have noticed—and I am sure what everyone here will have seen and met before—is that if you have two people and one might have lower grades than the other one but one is more articulate and more confident, they tend to be the ones who turn out to be more successful, even if their grades are not as



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high as other people.

It will come as no surprise to the rest of the Committee that I am going to mention oracy and how important I think that is. Do you think that a way to help more disadvantaged students go to school is to look at improving and working with their softer skills in FE, such as the skills of oracy, confidence and presentation, so that they get into universities such as Cambridge when they have their interviews?

Professor Diamond: I could not agree more. I said at the beginning that it is about what you learn inside and outside the classroom. There are many things, for example—this might sound trivial—clubs and societies, that enable people to grow as people and to gain more confidence. I am very happy to use confidence alongside aspiration. We need to enable people to grow and then their ability will be able to flourish.

Stuart Cannell: I could not agree more. Higher education is not just about academic merit and potentially securing a better job; it is about the personal and professional growth that you have throughout your time there.

Professor Vignoles: I agree on the point about oracy, which is vital, but I think we also have to have a good understanding of the institutional structures that get people to where they end up. Your grades at school will impact on whether or not you are likely to be able to take advantage of any level of apprenticeship. We cannot ignore that. We need oracy as well, but I think the low achievement in schools of the lower socioeconomic group of children cannot be wished away by trying to improve their confidence. The grades really do matter.

Professor Diamond: It cannot be wished away, but contextual admissions are so important. What Professor Vignoles has just said is absolutely right: contextual admissions do not mean the person is absolutely ready for study. They need extra support and it comes down to the question of funding for FE, or indeed for HE. There is great work I have seen from Glasgow University that says, "Contextual admissions, give people lots of support, by the end of the first semester everything is fine."

Q222 **Ian Mearns:** To come back to the issue of careers advice, I think it is now over 20 years ago since the late Malcolm Wicks referred to what was happening back in the mid-1990s; that the careers advice that some schools were giving was akin to pensions mis-selling in terms of it not being important and being more about the needs and aspirations of the institution more than the individual child. What can we do about that? How are we going to get back to a situation where careers advice is not only of good quality but impartial and independent of the institution that is imparting that advice?

Professor Vignoles: There are some institutional barriers here. When you look at what people are trying to put into the school curriculum, the



pressures on time are huge. Schools, as a result of the regulation by Ofsted and others, are driven by the metrics. In those metrics, the priority given to good-quality careers guidance is absence. We could conclude from that that you need to add some sort of metric around career guidance into Ofsted criteria. The problem with that is that we cannot keep adding things to the school box and hoping that the schools will miraculously deliver.

The other thing, as I have said earlier, is that the careers guidance needs to be constantly updated. It is a very complex thing. I think technology may have some role here, providing advice and guidance nationally outside of schools, but ultimately there is evidence that young children need to be walked through the process, and there is no substitute for that happening in schools. We need to think very hard about how we ask schools to do this and we have to resource it.

Q223 Michelle Donelan: For the review to be robust and a true picture, it needs to accurately take into account student views. How do you think that is achievable and what do you think student priorities will be? Will they be the destinations, will they be the choice, the accessibility and so on?

Stuart Cannell: I think they should consult students in a more focus-group setup. They could certainly consult with the OFS student panel. In terms of priorities, I have already highlighted that financial support should be a big highlight of the review. It is not just about access into higher education; it is about ensuring that students can benefit throughout their time.

Professor Diamond: When we did the Welsh review, the President of NUS Wales was a full member of the review. We took a lot of evidence from the review, from students more broadly, and some of the pamphlets that were written by NUS Wales had enormous influence on the final recommendations.

Professor Vignoles: I agree that it should be a two-pronged approach as well, with engagement to NUS, because it is fair to say that NUS may not represent every student but they do represent a significant proportion of students.

Q224 Michelle Donelan: Is it important also to take into account the views of recent former students? Otherwise, the student body will not know to expect after they leave or what their outcomes will be, so you can get a bit of a skewed picture, can't you?

Stuart Cannell: Yes, and certainly potential applicants into the higher education sector as well to see what their aspirations are and what they would expect.

Q225 Michelle Donelan: Do you think that will be the most difficult part of the review, potentially?



Stuart Cannell: Engaging with applicants?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, former students. NUS represents the student body. There is no body for recently graduated students but they are the ones who know whether their degree was useful for getting them to where they wanted to get to.

Stuart Cannell: That would be difficult but it would be worthwhile.

Professor Diamond: If there was a will, it is not rocket science to achieve.

Q226 **Emma Hardy:** Is the NUS being formally consulted throughout this review?

Stuart Cannell: Within the English review of funding? I am not too sure.

Professor Vignoles: I think it is being consulted but not represented. That is my understanding.

Q227 **Chair:** Can I go back to further education and apprenticeships? If I could get short answers, that would be helpful. Do you believe that further education and apprenticeships should be almost a central part to the review of higher education that the Government are doing? Is that what you are saying?

Professor Vignoles: Yes, degree-level apprenticeships absolutely should be part of the review, but I am also saying that the routes through further education that are not necessarily about apprenticeship should also be considered, because that transition into HE for those students is as important.

Q228 **Chair:** Does Cambridge do a lot of work with local FE colleges?

Professor Vignoles: Yes. I can consult colleagues to get the details of the arrangements for the new degree. Collaboration and consultation with every college is obviously important, but there are system-wide issues around funding and so on that I would imagine would be within the remit of the review.

Q229 **Chair:** Do you do outreach into those colleges to try to get people to come to your university?

Professor Vignoles: We do outreach, yes.

Q230 **Chair:** In the FE colleges specifically?

Professor Vignoles: Yes, we do it on an area-based approach, as you may be aware. We pick geographical areas of the country and try to reach the students who either might benefit from HE or might potentially come to Cambridge.

Q231 **Chair:** Specifically through FE, not just schools?

Professor Vignoles: Yes, but it is part of a wider activity.



Stuart Cannell: I think it is a core element of the review. Whether it is the main element I am not too sure, because I think, as Sir Ian said, it should be a holistic overview of the entire system.

Professor Diamond: I simply reaffirm that FE is much more than apprenticeships, and we need to recognise that very much. It should also include postgraduate, for the very simple reason that people from low-income backgrounds need a system that gives them the opportunity to aim even higher and to get all the qualifications they need to benefit from their ability.

Q232 **Ian Mearns:** You quoted a paper that found that graduates' socioeconomic background is the biggest determinant of their future earnings. How can we design a system that reduces this predetermination, as it were, based on background?

Professor Vignoles: If you are referring to the paper that we did looking at graduate outcomes, there are big differences in income between students from poor and rich backgrounds. Much of that is explained by the trajectories and the achievement that they have in a school system. The first answer is that we need to find ways of improving the achievement of poor students in our education system well before they get to higher education.

The second answer, going to back to what was referred to earlier, is the potential for contextualised admissions to work on the margins of this. We need to be realistic. The likelihood of going to a high-status institution if you come from a relatively low socioeconomic background is not huge. Most people who get the level of achievement do go to an appropriate level of institution, but there is a group that does not, and we should target them.

There is also evidence that students from state schools and from schools that have lower levels of achievement on average do better in higher education for a given set of A-levels. In other words, once in higher education they fly. That is a clear justification for some level of contextualised admissions where we acknowledge that they have come through the system the hard way and we admit with slightly lower grades but we are likely to see similar outcomes at the end of their degree.

Q233 **Ian Mearns:** Did you find any evidence that there are still significant levels of old-boy network, if I can use that term, from a better connected background?

Professor Vignoles: We were able to ask the question if you take two students who attended the same institution and who took the same degree subject, whether that finally levels the playing field in the sense that they end up with the same level of earnings. The answer is no; there is a gap in earnings. We cannot pin the cause down. It could be confidence, and it could be the networks. It could be that when you come from a higher income background you have the luxury of an extended job



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search and the ability to decide on the optimal job for you, whereas if you graduate into a difficult labour market from a low socioeconomic background you tend to take the first job that you are offered. That could also explain some of the issue.

The other consequence or implication of that work could be that universities might want to think about targeted support for labour market transition of their students after they leave the university. I use the word “targeted” in the sense of targeting their careers advice and their resource on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Q234 Chair: On the £860 million outreach budget that goes to universities in order to get more people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education, is that money being used effectively? The number of state school pupils going into universities is virtually static—I think it has gone up by 0.01%. In terms of the Russell Group, in something like nine out of 24 Russell Group universities the number of state school pupils has gone down. Could you use that money more effectively?

Professor Vignoles: I am happy to come back on that. It is used in a variety of ways. Not all of that money is being evaluated in terms of its use. There is, I think, a shift in the sector to start high-quality evaluation, so in a few years’ time we will know what works in that area. At the moment I think it is a bit of a mixed bag.

Could it be used more effectively? Yes, but one of the problems is that if you are trying to improve pupils’ achievement, you should be perhaps spending it trying to improve pupils’ achievement, which is earlier in the system and it is not about outreach per se. However, it could also be used to provide additional support for students who you have admitted under a contextualised admission scheme, for example, to get them to the level that they can then benefit from the degree. It could also, as I said, be used to think about supporting lower socioeconomic group students as they exit the higher education system.

Q235 Chair: Given what we have said about apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships, do you think some of this money could be used to fund more degree apprenticeships because of the advantage it gives to people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more encouraged to do vocational training and skills?

Professor Diamond: I think people need to be encouraged to do whatever their wishes are. It could be apprenticeships or it could not be apprenticeships. What I do think Anna has said, which is incredibly important, is that this money is being used incredibly keenly in different places in different ways.

Q236 Chair: Yes, but it is not working, because the number of state school pupils is static.

Professor Diamond: What we do not know, with respect, is what works. It seems to me that in the spirit of what works, better evaluation of what



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works and then the sharing of best practice in what works would be the most effective first thing to do, rather than to start saying we are going to stop doing this and do something else. Let us find out what works and then move on.

Q237 Chair: To harp on about this, we do know that apprenticeships work in terms of the disadvantaged: 68% or 70% complete and 90% get jobs at the end of it or go on to additional education. As I said, 25% of apprentices come from the poorer fifth of areas in the country. I would like it to be a lot more but, as you said, surely this money could be better used. Not all of it, but if it is not working and the number of state schools is static, what we need to do is look at better ways of spending this money and apprenticeships might be the best way forward.

Professor Diamond: Or we need to enable people to have greater ambition and to be encouraged to follow their ambition. We would not want to force people into apprenticeships in a way of, "That is the sort you do." Let me give you an example. Through real push the medical school at the University of Aberdeen this year has 27% of its entrants from our definition of disadvantaged backgrounds—27%. That has not come by accident; it has come by enormous work right across the north and north-east of Scotland, with schools, enormous work in raising ambition and then a programme of having a foundation year for those people—a foundation year, I have to say, supported fully by the Scottish Government—who have the ability but are not yet ready.

Chair: I think that is brilliant, but it is sadly not the case across the board.

Professor Diamond: In the spirit of what works, that could be one advantage.

Q238 Ian Mearns: We used to have the Aimhigher programme in England, but that was abolished. It was not perfect, but it was a decent model that could have been improved upon. Do you think we need to reintroduce something of that nature?

Professor Diamond: I am a huge fan of Aimhigher, and I have also coined the term "aim even higher", which comes to my point about postgraduate.

Chair: Anna, could you comment on both our questions.

Professor Vignoles: Yes. Aimhigher is a nice example of some of the problems that we have in this policy space. Aimhigher was a joined-up programme. It was not evaluated rigorously and that was probably one of the reasons why it was terminated, even though I think all the evidence since then shows there is a need for such a programme. We are now seeing more investment in widening participation, we are seeing a movement from within the sector to start evaluating things rigorously. We need to encourage that, not chop it off at the knees just as it gets started. I also worry about the assumption that the only way you can get



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lower socioeconomic group students into higher education is through the apprenticeship route.

Q239 **Chair:** To be fair, I was not saying it was the only way; I was saying that, given that the £860 million is not producing the results we would like, and outreach money and so on, it was one way that some of that money could be put to encourage more people to do these degree apprenticeships.

Professor Vignoles: I appreciate that, but one of the issues I think we have is institutional incentives. I would suggest that what we need to continue to do is to put pressure on universities to do the very best we can to try to recruit and admit students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and, in a sense, overcome some of the limitations that they have experienced in the school system. If that means extra time for these students, that might be the best way forward. The trouble with diverting attention on the widening participation front into the apprenticeship route is that you may cause people to switch to a different track.

Q240 **Ian Mearns:** Since we now have an increasing amount of data about graduate earnings, do you think we could develop a model that could use that data to hold universities to account for the outcomes?

Professor Vignoles: It depends what you mean by outcomes. Universities obviously should be accountable for outcomes in the broader sense of building good citizens and so on.

Q241 **Ian Mearns:** I am talking about social inclusion in getting youngsters from the lower socioeconomic backgrounds into higher earnings as a result of their university education.

Professor Vignoles: Yes, but there is a general issue around using graduate earnings to judge what is going on inside universities. The first thing is that when you are looking at graduate earnings you are looking at the results of higher education that happened five or 10 years previously. Using the graduate earnings to judge the quality of current provision, for example, is not a very sensible thing to do. That is one issue.

Ian Mearns: It might be a guide to future action, though.

Professor Vignoles: Yes, and it can be used in the way that you are suggesting, where you are looking at the proportions of lower socioeconomic group students going into different institutions, understanding the patterns of subject choice and why they may be limited and then consequently looking at how we are closing that gap in earnings once they leave higher education. It can be used to inform policy in the broadest sense even if not specifically to judge the quality of a current course.



Stuart Cannell: To go back to your original question, which is how the £860 million could be properly spent in a better manner, I agree that an evaluation would have to be done to see what was working. To reiterate one point that I made previously, it is not just about having higher education and getting in, it is about then giving students the academic support they need to succeed, and inspiring confidence in them that if they are getting 60 that is considered a good mark, whereas in their secondary school they might have been getting 80. They say, "I don't understand this." It is that preconception that everyone understands higher education as soon as they get in. Some do not and it might take years for them to understand. It is about making sure that support is there and that it is robust and enables them to succeed throughout their time in higher education.

Q242 **Emma Hardy:** In December the former Universities Minister announced two-year accelerated degrees. I have some concerns about two-year degrees. My concern is that they will end up being the value range in the degree world. I have two concerns. One relates to the fact that I think university is also a time when people have to think and to study and to read and you are going to be squashing that into two years. It is going to entrench this difference in disadvantage, because those who can afford to will have three years and those who cannot will have two.

The other point was made to me by somebody who used to be a lecturer at Oxford, who said that lecturers use their summer period for all their research and all their work and that if you had a two-year degree, which meant they had it condensed and could not use that summer time for research, all the aspirational lecturers would leave the universities, putting forward two-year degrees and go to the universities with three, therefore increasing the divide. That is my opinion. What is yours?

Stuart Cannell: They are all valid points. I do not think accelerated degrees are all of a sudden going to become the norm; they are very much going to be the exception, maybe in certain subject areas. Reflecting on my undergraduate experience, I am very happy that I had a foundation as well and I took a year out and worked within the students' union. That time allowed me to develop myself in both a personal way and a professional way. It allowed me to explore the softer side of university, not just the academic—the clubs and societies.

If you condense that into two years, it is very much that you have to keep hitting the marks and it is all about the academic sphere, so it takes that away. The second thing is it is riskier if students fail, because as soon as they start to fail and the curriculum suddenly gets away from them, there is not that breathing space that is allowed within the summer period.

Professor Diamond: I echo all those points. My overview is that they provide something alongside the three-year degree for a particular group of people—typically mature students who really do want to get things done as quickly as possible. I can see that there is a role for that kind of



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degree but I do not, for all the reasons that I agree with what you said and what Stuart has said, see it as something that we should see as the norm.

Q243 Emma Hardy: If that was offered to mature students as a two-year degree, will they get the high-quality lecturers wanting to teach them? As my friend who has now left the University of Oxford was saying, he would not choose to teach at a university offering two-year degrees because he would not have time to do his research projects in the summer.

Professor Diamond: In many ways that is about organisation within universities and a conversation could have been had with that person to say, "Do not teach in the second semester but teach in the summer semester so that your workload is the same and you get the space to do your research." I am not saying that is the only answer but it is one answer.

We do need to make sure, it seems to me, that people on research and teaching contracts have enough time to do research. It is also absolutely critical that we ensure that we have the very best people teaching on courses. That is something that in my experience all universities are committed to.

Professor Vignoles: We also need to be clear what problem we are trying to solve. I have heard the two-year degrees being used as a solution to lower-income students getting higher education. If they cost the same, they are prorated, and it makes it harder to work during that two-year period, then it seems to me it is not an obvious solution to the problem that we have, which is how can we encourage, for example, part-time provision that may genuinely increase the chances of students from low SES backgrounds.

Q244 Chair: In the final two minutes can I ask you for your views, as briefly as possible, as to why part-time students have gone down so much and what we should do about it?

Professor Diamond: I apologise for speaking too much. Having said that—

Chair: You have a lot of wisdom to give the Committee.

Professor Diamond: I am passionate about this whole area. I think you need to get the fees down in a sensible way. The way we did it in Wales was to say, "There is a RAB charge here"—I am sorry for getting technical here—"and for part-time students the payback is much better so the RAB charge is much lower. Therefore, take the RAB charge out and get the fees right down." That was the way we did it, and I am sure there are other ways.

Stuart Cannell: I would also look at more innovative, blended learning models so that if somebody is taking a part-time degree, postgraduate or



undergraduate, they can engage with it more fully. Obviously they are trying to get that work-life balance as well.

Professor Vignoles: Two things. If part-time and certain students are more risk-averse on the loan aspect, the only way you will overcome that is to rethink how we fund the part-time provision. The second is to be very confident that we are not also seeing some institutional response to high levels of fee for full-time undergraduate degrees—in other words, are institutions offering the range of part-time provision that we would like them to—and being very careful that we have not, in any of the things that we do, encouraged them to focus more on the full-time option.

Q245 **Chair:** Should we not give a lot more funding to institutions, such as the Open University, that are not only a great bridge to the disadvantaged in terms of doing higher education, but are really convenient and suitable for part-time learners?

Professor Diamond: I think the Open University is a fabulous institution. Having said that, there are many other local institutions that are now teaching part time in a way that is commensurate with earning while you are learning. What we need is to give potential part-time students as much choice and as much opportunity as possible.

Professor Vignoles: I think it is also important, when you are looking at the pattern of part-time provision, to look very carefully at the types of students who are undertaking that part-time provision in the different institutions, and in particular their socioeconomic background. It is not a given that all part-time students are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, including the Open University.

Q246 **Chair:** No, but it is a bridge and a significant amount of disadvantaged students do go to the Open University. Of course you should have choice and as many as possible, but the Open University is the Rolls Royce of this type of learning. It has incredible brand recognition and is understood and is quality teaching.

Professor Diamond: I am a huge fan of the Open University, but it teaches not necessarily in the same way as part time. For those people who really want the face-to-face part of it as the whole thing, then part time can be done. There is a fantastic example of Swansea University teaching part-time degrees in Cardiff but doing so where people are able to go to two late afternoon and evenings a week, therefore enabling them to fit their study around that, but they get that important face-to-face time every week.

Q247 **Chair:** Many people are not able to do that, especially if they are single parents or whatever.

Professor Diamond: That is why we need a range and support for single parents who are studying full time.



Chair: Yes, absolutely. Thank you very much. Your contributions have been valuable to our Committee inquiry and I am sure we will be working with you as we publish our report.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Michael Barber.

Q248 **Chair:** We are going to start straightaway, Sir Michael. Good morning and thank you for coming to the Committee today. We are going to start off on the Office for Students and value for money.

Q249 **Michelle Donelan:** Good morning. Value for money is so important, especially given the level of fees. If you were purchasing anything else in life you would be expecting value for money, yet only 38% of students believe that their course does offer value for money, which is quite shocking. What do you believe that your Office for Students is going to do about this and can do about this?

Sir Michael Barber: Thank you for the question. The 38% figure that you are quoting is from the report we commissioned from our student panel. You just heard from Stuart, who is one of the distinguished members of that panel. That is very much a student perspective of value for money. I do think, before I come to answering your question, that emphasising that value for money from a university programme is quite a lot more complicated than many products because it is very personal: does it get you into the right job, does it give you the confidence, the character, the experience that you want? Are you a part-time student combining it with work? Value for money will look different and that comes through very strongly in the report that you are quoting.

Yes, it is a disappointing figure, and if you look at the NAO report that you have also heard evidence on in this Committee, that is down at 32%, so this is a problem. There are things that we can do. We do not control the fees, so we do not control inputs. That is obviously a matter for the review that we have been discussing in the previous session, but there are things we can do.

The most important thing we are going to do is bring a student perspective, with Stuart and his colleagues on the panel. What you find when you talk to students—every time I visit a university I talk to the students as well as the faculty and the management—is they say the most important thing about value for money is the quality of the teaching they get. They want it to be relevant, regular, inspiring, well informed. In particular, they want one-to-one feedback on essays or assignments or pieces of work where they can learn what they could have done better.

Chair: Can I gently ask you to be concise, because we have a lot to get through?



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Sir Michael Barber: I am sorry, but this does seem fundamentally important.

Q250 **Michelle Donelan:** On that point you are making, one of the key aspects that students tell me is that they want to know where their money is being spent. They see it as going into this black hole. Especially when some courses do not offer much teaching time, it is easy to make the assumption that your money is going on potentially marketing and other things, rather than your teaching, your research and your resource at university. I know there is the idea of having a published document, a bit like your council tax, where you see the exact breakdown. Do you think that would provide a lot more confidence?

Sir Michael Barber: I think the students say in the report from which you are quoting that they do want more detail about where the money goes and we will be using the power of transparency. Value for money is one of our four priorities as Office for Students and in the regulatory framework we will be asking universities to give evidence of value for money in a whole range of ways. We do, if necessary, have powers to intervene if we think value for money is not being delivered. Since we do not control the inputs—that is a matter for the Government and the fee review—we will strongly push to get the quality of the outcomes, both the employability and the quality of the course and the teaching, as I have emphasised. We will look at what the students get for their money and where they get to go for their money.

Q251 **Michelle Donelan:** Also the transparency of where the money is going in the first place?

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. I think in general we will be using transparency. You already know the LEO data is out there showing where people go. We will be publishing data from the teaching excellence framework. We have done that institutionally and that will come to subject level over the next couple of years, so there will be more and more information available for students and their families and so on to see where the value for money is being delivered and where it is not.

Q252 **Thelma Walker:** How will the Office for Students make sure that students make an informed choice about what and where to study?

Sir Michael Barber: The question is very important. The question of informed choice came up a little bit in the previous session, in answer to one of Ian's questions. I think it is important that we improve this. The quality of information available to students before they choose what course, whether it is a degree apprenticeship or a—

Thelma Walker: We mentioned that transition period in the previous session.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. If you look at the NAO report, the vast majority of students are making their decision between the ages of 15



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and 18, and the quality of information available for them is not good enough at the moment.

One of the things I have already asked the student panel to do—because they have a strong perspective on this and you heard that from Stuart—is for them to take this up in their next meeting, which I think is on 18 April, and to turn it not just into a discussion at a meeting but a project where they consider, “How could we improve it? How could we, the Office for Students, improve the quality of information?” We are getting into schools. Our student panel has school students on it and we have a range of ways of consulting. We need to make it intuitive, clear, much faster, much better. There is a lot we can do with this. At the moment there is a lot of information out there but it is confusing, it is difficult and it is hard to get dispassionate advice. It is going to be a top priority for us.

Q253 Thelma Walker: Contextual admissions were mentioned by the previous panel. What are your thoughts on that?

Sir Michael Barber: This is a matter for universities to experiment. Personally I am happy to see people experimenting with their admissions, contextual admissions or a range of other things that they should do. In my past I have worked with public universities in the United States on these things. You have to try out a variety of things. As Anna Vignoles was saying, testing what works and then refining and experimenting is the way forward. I have no problem personally with contextual admissions, but that is a matter for universities to decide; we will challenge them to push up access for disadvantaged students, but they will decide how they go about it.

Q254 Thelma Walker: Likewise, on the proposal of a foundation year for disadvantaged students who are ripe but not ready, would the Office for Students support that?

Sir Michael Barber: Lady Margaret Hall is an example of a college in Oxford doing exactly that. We would certainly be supportive. We start from the point of view of institutional autonomy, so we want the universities to experiment. We will look at the outcomes that are delivered by the things they try, so we will get into the kind of evidence that we are talking about. We do not want to be a state institution insisting on particular models, but we do want to insist on the outcomes. We want to see much better access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, much better progression through university.

Thelma Walker: It is on ensuring it is on the agenda for discussion. That is what I am asking.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes, including promoting the idea of degree apprenticeships, which still has, as Stuart was saying, a stigma attached to it. We do need to look at these things, but we do not want to promote one model. We are a regulator, not an agency imposing models.

Thelma Walker: It is on ensuring there is a real choice.



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Sir Michael Barber: Yes, absolutely. I totally agree.

Q255 **Emma Hardy:** The Sutton Trust recently did a report talking about what makes students choose where they want to go to university is the location, because of the changes to funding with so many more students now choosing to stay at home and commute. Therefore, on the informed choice it seems that it is not going to be where they choose, because they are going to choose somewhere nearby, but maybe more what they will choose. Is that going to be reflected in the information given?

Sir Michael Barber: I am not sure what you are asking. What we would like is for all students to be able to look at the full array of choices, from highly academic degrees through to whatever they think is right, with dispassionate advice available to them. Britain—or England, since that is what we are talking about in this session—is unusual, globally speaking, for the number of students who do not stay near home.

Q256 **Emma Hardy:** Yes, but this report is saying that is changing; that more disadvantaged students are now staying at home. What I am saying is that where they go to study seems to be more of a question for so many students than what they go and study. Will the information you give emphasise the what over the where? It seems to be cost that is the decider.

Sir Michael Barber: I think we do need to get better information at the course level and what you study and what the benefits of particular courses are in the long-run when you have completed the degree, but I hope we do not move to a situation where people are staying in their own region for whatever reason. I would encourage people to be aspirational about what they choose.

Emma Hardy: That is what the Sutton Trust is saying.

Sir Michael Barber: That is a good point and the funding review will need to look at that.

Q257 **Trudy Harrison:** How high do you think confidence is in the sector? With OFS being the new regulator, what are we doing to boost confidence?

Sir Michael Barber: It is a great question. Higher education has been very much in the news and very high profile over the last year, for a whole range of different reasons—it has been higher profile than I expected when I took on this job. To the underlying point that you are raising, I see part of my personal mission as to generate a sense of optimism about higher education.

There are two big reasons, and we can go into details as well. One is, whatever the problems that have been identified in the last year or so, we have a fantastic higher education sector. It is diverse and it is doing fantastic work. I travel a lot for my other work. I hear comments in Canada, in Russia, wherever I go, about how good our higher education system is.



Ian Mearns: Careful about Russia.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes, I will keep an eye out for that. Wherever you go you hear really positive things. That is one thing. The second thing is that we have the best educated generation of school students in British history coming to our universities. It is not perfect, but it is the best educated generation ever. If you put together a brilliant higher education system with the best-educated generation of school students, there are lots of reasons to be optimistic. My message to vice-chancellors and university leaders is to get out and promote what you are doing in your local community, in your city and your region as well as nationally and internationally, because we have a lot to be proud of. To put it crudely, in post-Brexit Britain, the higher education system is one of our most precious assets as we seek to succeed in the future.

Q258 **Trudy Harrison:** With regard to confidence in the OFS, particularly around its autonomy, as it is directly funded by DFE, directly reporting to the Secretary of State, can it really be independent or autonomous?

Sir Michael Barber: First, We are currently funded by the DFE but we will be funded by the institutions. They will pay a fee to us, as with other regulators, so we will be independent in funding once we are through this transitional year or two.

Secondly, we have an independent board, an outstanding board. We met yesterday. They are really good people. We are not going to be the creature of the Minister. Of course we will have a good relationship with the DFE, and we will be in dialogue with Ministers and other political leaders, but we are going to be an independent body. Remember, we do not fully exist until 3 April; so far we have not fully started. We got some powers on 1 January and we fully exist from 3 April. Judge us on our record.

Chair: The acoustics are not fantastic in here, so if you could speak slightly louder. It is not your fault; it is the room.

Sir Michael Barber: Okay. Do you want me to repeat the last half hour?

Q259 **Chair:** We have had a meeting with the Russell Group. They say: "TEF does not recognise institutions' performance against the metrics in absolute terms but rather shows how well institutions perform against expectations for the particular student intake. This can lead to quite perverse results, where institutions with very good performance on things like continuation rates and employment outcomes have higher benchmarks that can be very difficult to beat and therefore do not receive recognition, while others with much lower performance in absolute terms are recognised because their benchmarks are lower. At subject level this is likely to be amplified as almost 100% of graduates in some subjects like medicine and dentistry will enter professional jobs so it is very difficult to breach the benchmarks."

The reason why they sent this to me is because I challenged them, when



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I had a very good meeting with the Russell Group, to ask why something like 51 out of 59 of the gold-standard universities, as I remember it, are not Russell Group universities. Could you comment on that?

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. The TEF is a major innovation globally. There is a global interest in what we are experimenting with here. Last year, as you know, the TEF results institutionally were published, I think in June or July. I have been to 15 or 16 universities since that was published. I have yet to meet a vice-chancellor or a team at a university who is not taking TEF very seriously indeed.

People said at the time that LSE, for example, which got a bronze, would not take it seriously because the progression data in LEO was so good. If you talk to the new vice-chancellor, it is the first thing she has prioritised. She is working hard to improve it. They want to improve their teaching. It has put the quality of teaching on the agenda.

Q260 **Chair:** Are they right to say this or are they wrong?

Sir Michael Barber: I can see why they are sceptical, and we are experimenting right now with two models of subject-level TEF. Next year there will be an independent review—it is in the higher education legislation—and all of these things will be looked at. It is not an easy thing to do.

Q261 **Chair:** When I have raised this with non-Russell Group universities, they have laughed, saying, “They would say that, wouldn’t they?” What is your view about that?

Sir Michael Barber: As I have said, I have talked to universities, Russell Group and non. I do not think in groups but I have talked to university leaders across the spectrum. They are taking TEF very seriously.

Q262 **Chair:** Are the Russell Group wrong to say this?

Sir Michael Barber: The Russell Group should say what they like, but I am not as sceptical as implied in that.

Chair: You are not a sceptic?

Sir Michael Barber: I think one of the top priorities for the OFS is to get subject-level TEF working well, because that is the information that students need to make the kind of decision—

Q263 **Chair:** What you are saying is that you are not as sceptical about the benchmarking or the way it is measured and you do not think it is unfair on Russell Group universities as they are describing.

Sir Michael Barber: No, I agree with you.

Q264 **Chair:** It is quite important. The Committee went to a brilliant Russell Group university, Warwick University, which is doing outstanding work on skills and degree apprenticeships and PhD students, everything you would want—supportive UTCs—from a university. Do you think that we



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have it skewed that most people see an elite university as a Russell Group university? Whether right or wrong it seems to be the marketing, yet not all of them perform in the way that you would imagine, and many non-Russell Group universities perform much better. Do you think we have a wrong way that we look at university and do we really need this artificial divide?

Of course, they are called Russell Group because they do research, but the fact is that they are seen as elitist. As I said earlier in the previous panel, something like nine out of 24 have even fewer state school pupils than before. We should look at the whole way we see universities and, as you said a moment ago, see them as a whole and not as some kind of weird premier league, which is not a premier league in reality, and other universities that are not seen as in the premier league should be in that premier league?

Sir Michael Barber: We do our best. We will look at universities in their individual characteristics. If the Russell Group wants to talk to us, we will talk to them, or the other groups, that is fine, but we will not categorise our policy around Russell Group and non-Russell Group, or any of that. In that sense the Russell Group will not be a factor in the way we think about policy. You are quite right that many universities that are not in the Russell Group are making a fantastic contribution. I visited Nottingham Trent University not very long ago. I am an honorary graduate of it. They are doing fantastic work; you can see its impact on the city. That is, I believe, a great university. Manchester Metropolitan University—

Q265 **Chair:** That is the whole thing; those universities are not regarded as elite. There is still a lot of steadiness.

Sir Michael Barber: Right. We do have to change these perceptions, and we, the Office for Students, are not going to promote the Russell Group at the expense of others. We will promote good universities that are doing great things for students in their diverse ways. I do think, going back to your visit to Warwick, that it is very important that some universities that have high status, such as Warwick, do degree apprenticeships. What we do not want is degree apprenticeships to be seen as low-status options. I think they are a fantastic option. Warwick and Exeter, and places like that—that you are a graduate of—while they are doing degree apprenticeships, will help boost the entire brand.

Q266 **Ian Mearns:** The vice-chancellor of Oxford is wrong in that case?

Sir Michael Barber: We will see. Each university should choose for itself, but if Cambridge is doing it we will see what Oxford thinks.

Q267 **Chair:** Can you encourage the vice-chancellor of Oxford to change her mind?

Sir Michael Barber: It is not my job to encourage the vice-chancellor of Oxford to change her mind. Certainly if she asked me informally, I would say—



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Q268 **Chair:** Would you be happy if Oxford University started introducing degree apprenticeships?

Sir Michael Barber: As a graduate of Oxford, I would be delighted if they did degree apprenticeships, yes.

Q269 **Mr Wragg:** Good morning, Sir Michael. It is nice to see you back. I remember you coming for your pre-appointment hearing. You alluded to the choppiness of the water in recent months, which perhaps you did not quite envisage then. Without wishing to intrude too much into private grief, I wonder if you are able to reflect upon any reputational damage to your organisation caused by the method through which members are appointed to the board.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. By the way, it is not private grief, because I have talked about this on "The World at One". There are a couple of mistakes here. One is the Toby Young appointment, which became very celebrated, depending on what you mean by the word "celebrated." I should have asked at the end of the interview—he did a very good interview—the DFE to do more due diligence on his social media, given his reputation. They say, honourably, that they think they should have done it without me asking, but I think I should have asked them. That was a mistake. I have learnt a lot from that. It did cause some reputational damage to me personally and to the OFS in a sensitive phase, so in that sense I regret it, but we got to the right place. We got a fantastic board.

On the student representative, I am very happy with where we came out. I chaired the interviews. We recommended three outstanding students to the Minister. The Minister, as set out in Peter Riddell's report, rejected all three. We will re-run that competition and we will get a good student. I was very keen that we had a student in the meantime, and as we had just appointed a student panel we picked one of them. She is doing a wonderful job.

Q270 **Mr Wragg:** Okay. I wondered, therefore, in my next question perhaps if you wanted to reflect further on the rejection by the Minister of those names you put forward, but also perhaps give consideration to the lack, perhaps, of people with direct experience of FE and apprenticeship backgrounds on the board. Perhaps if you want to reflect on those two points.

Chair: Can I just come in on that? I do find it absolutely astonishing—and I have raised this in the House of Commons in the Chamber—and incredibly disappointing, given the role that further education now has with higher education, that there is not one representative of FE or apprenticeships on the board. I think it is shocking, to be honest, that this important part of our education is neglected yet again.

Sir Michael Barber: Very briefly, you asked me to reflect. They are ministerial appointments, so the Ministers make the appointments. My job as the chair of the panel is to recommend appointable candidates. If



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the Minister chooses not to appoint, that is perfectly within his rights. On the point that you and the Chairman have just made, one of the candidates put forward was a very good representative of FE but was not chosen. We have a vacancy, which is the good news.

Q271 **Chair:** You have a vacancy. You may be in the midst of decision, but you have an incredibly important role in guiding that decision.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. I would welcome good applications from people in the FE sector. I am not saying it should be Buggins' turn for the FE sector, but a good application from FE when that is re-advertised would be fantastic.

Q272 **Chair:** Yes, but it is not the case of Buggins' turn because you have representatives from higher education and no one from FE on there—no one. Yet again, as the AOC have described it, further education has been neglected. It is forgotten as always.

Sir Michael Barber: We are not forgetting it but you make a good point. The DFE representative does cover further and higher education and makes contributions to that effect, but I agree with you.

Q273 **Emma Hardy:** Going back to the point that Trudy made about the independence of the OFS, it does call that into question when the Minister can reject the student that you put forward to represent on the board. When the Minister can just turn around and reject that, it does call into question the whole issue of independence. Also, why is there no rep from the National Union of Students on the OFS?

Sir Michael Barber: Two things: this august institution passed the legislation that makes our board ministerial appointments, so there is nothing I can do about that. Ministers are perfectly entitled to exercise their discretion if they are making appointments. It does not question our independence. We will recommend further people for the vacancy. Most people who we recommended were indeed appointed. We have a board of 14 people who are outstanding. One of the things I was very keen on, as Peter Riddell's report makes clear, was that, given that I had inherited six board members, five of whom are men, I wanted to make sure we got to a minimum of 40% women on the board. We got there. I have played a big part in selecting the board. If you just focus on the ones that were rejected, you miss the bigger point that 13 or 14 people were appointed who were recommended by me.

Q274 **Chair:** If you played a big part in selecting the board, you have a good chance of getting an FE representative.

Sir Michael Barber: It would be great to have some good applications from FE people, absolutely.

Q275 **Emma Hardy:** Also from the National Union of Students?

Sir Michael Barber: On that point, the NUS president, Shakira Martin, is on our student panel. We wanted a student representative. Again, it is in



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the law that this august institution passed that there should be an independent student person. It is not a right of the NUS president, but we are constantly in dialogue with Shakira. At our launch meeting she made a great speech directly after me. We are completely in touch with the NUS, and it is a great dialogue.

Q276 Thelma Walker: It is not looking like discretion; it is looking like discrimination. When you talked about Ministers using their discretion about who is on the board, to me that smacks not of discretion but discrimination.

Sir Michael Barber: Peter Riddell set out exactly what happened in the report. We can choose our words as we choose them but we have a board that is outstanding. The most important thing for me is that I have an outstanding board of people. We have one vacancy, we have a great student, and we will advertise the student vacancy.

Q277 Thelma Walker: Can it be outstanding without a rep from the NUS?

Sir Michael Barber: The NUS is actively involved in our student panel. Yes, it can be outstanding without a rep from NUS.

Q278 Ian Mearns: FE is a large part of our educational sector and there is not even one rep. You have a board of 14 and you do not have one rep. Should a couple of places be created for FE on the board?

Chair: Let's just reiterate—sorry I am saying this again—it just seems exactly what is wrong with our country. FE is so often not included in these kinds of bodies and yet plays such an incredibly important role in terms of social disadvantage, in terms of higher education, and in terms of degree apprenticeships and foundation degrees. I find it incredible that we might be lucky that there might be an FE person who might be on the board in—when is the appointment, sorry?

Sir Michael Barber: It will be advertised shortly.

Q279 Chair: When will it be appointed by?

Sir Michael Barber: Sometime by the end of the summer term of the university calendar.

Q280 Chair: Okay. We might be lucky; if they win the lottery you might get an FE person. That is basically what you are saying. Why was this not thought about, or—I do not know whether you did—why didn't you encourage or support an FE person on the board, or at least one or two of them, in the first place.

Sir Michael Barber: First, I get the message really strongly from both you and Ian, and other members of the Committee—thank you, all of you. I definitely have the message. Because we are going to advertise the post I do not want to specify that that post should be dedicated to a particular sector, but I really got the message very strongly. There was, as I said a few minutes ago, among those recommended to the Minister a really strong FE person after I had finished chairing the panel. That



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person would have been an excellent representative. We will see what happens with the applications, but I have the message. Ian, the number 15 is specified in the legislation. We could look at having somebody from FE as an observer. I know you are not saying that, but if we had to compensate at some point we could do that. I do hear the message and I totally agree.

Q281 **Chair:** You have a student panel. Is that part of legislation, the student panel?

Sir Michael Barber: No, we have created that.

Q282 **Chair:** Why not create an apprentice panel?

Sir Michael Barber: We can look at all these options. Thank you.

Q283 **Chair:** "Looking at" means? Is that just to make me happy now or is that genuine? You say you are very supportive of degree apprenticeships, which I am incredibly encouraged by. Why not have an apprentice panel to ensure that degree apprentices and higher apprentices are recognised?

Sir Michael Barber: The reason I am not just saying yes is because I have not thought about it in the way that you have just put it. We will think about that and we should actively think about how we engage with the apprenticeship field with the degree apprenticeships. I would love to see the numbers grow. They have grown quite steeply in the last two years but they are still a really small proportion of the overall 2 million students. Let me take that away and we can send you a note saying how we are dealing with the FE.

Chair: That would be great. I would be extremely happy if you did that.

Sir Michael Barber: I am totally sympathetic to the angle that all of you are bringing here.

Q284 **Emma Hardy:** In your pre-appointment hearing, you described the TEF as a potentially powerful innovation. If tuition fees continue to be frozen, what role do you see the TEF playing as an indicator of quality?

Sir Michael Barber: At the time of that hearing the proposition was that the TEF will be linked to the ability of the universities to raise fees above £9,250. That is no longer the case. The fees are being reviewed. The TEF is part of the regulatory requirements that the OFS is putting in place. The TEF to me is really important, both in the information it provides for students and in the incentives it provides for universities of all kinds to improve the quality of teaching. If you look at what happened in 1986, the research assessment exercise, the first one, was developed. Over a 30-year period through RAE and then REF research has been dramatically improved in universities. Britain is one of the world's leading providers of research in universities. It is a wonderful thing. The TEF over time can provide the same incentive to improve the quality of teaching that we know needs to improve right across the system. The TEF is really important to me. It is a top priority for us; it is a top priority for students.



Chair: Thelma is going to ask about widening participation and access.

Q285 **Thelma Walker:** In oral evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, Nicola Dandridge spoke of sanctions for universities that are not doing enough on widening participation. What tools does the OFS have to intervene if an institution is not doing enough about avoiding the two-tier system?

Sir Michael Barber: A lot, actually. It was one of the big pluses for the new regime, compared with what was there in the past. The offer that was set up in 2004 is being incorporated into the Office for Students. We have a director of fair access and participation, an outstanding person called Chris Millward. He will lead for us on that. He has some statutory duties that are specified in the legislation. Not just access but access and progression through university and into the labour market are key themes and top priorities for us. They are built into the regulatory framework that was published about two or three weeks ago. All the powers we have to intervene against the regulatory framework apply to access, success and progression as they apply to value for money and other things.

Obviously we do not want to end up intervening in universities on a regular basis for failing; we want them to succeed in this. The previous group of people giving evidence talked about this a lot, but we are going to prioritise this. I personally see this as a big issue for me. I worked for 20 or 30 years on school reform, and if we cannot put something really good together that connects schools, colleges, employers and the universities into some transformative pathways that will effect social mobility and improve equity, I will be really disappointed. This is going to be a big priority for me.

Q286 **Thelma Walker:** Will you be looking at sanctions though?

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. The sanctions are all there. Each university will have to put an access and participation plan to us under the regulatory framework. We will see what those are like. We can intervene either if they come up with very poor plans or if they come up with plans that are apparently good but they do not do anything that is set out in the plan. We can fine them. Ultimately, if we do not think they are going to get there, we can take away their university title. We have big powers to do this. I should say, by the way, when I visit universities I find university leaders very committed to improving access, success and progression, but we are going to make sure they prioritise it.

Q287 **Chair:** We are not doing a great job, though, with state school pupils remaining roughly the same.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. State school pupils are not, in my view, the best measure. It is a measure, and it is certainly worth looking at, but it is not the most important thing, because you want to look at it from different social quintiles and so on. We have seen progress in the last five or six years, as set out in the NAO report, but it is not nearly enough.



Q288 **Chair:** How do you define progress?

Sir Michael Barber: The percentage coming in from the lowest quintile.

Q289 **Chair:** Right. What about when they come out? There is a big difference. To me, I am focused on outputs, and are people from disadvantaged backgrounds not just going through university but actually getting skilled jobs with good wages at the end?

Sir Michael Barber: I totally agree, and that is the advantage that the OFS has over its predecessors. We can look at that whole picture. That is why they are not called “access plans”, but “access and participation plans.” We will be looking at where these young people—not always young people—end up in the labour market. That will be a key part of the way we think about it.

Q290 **Chair:** Will that be part of the TEF in terms of how you grade the universities, in terms of destination?

Sir Michael Barber: The TEF will take account of a range of factors, but the TEF is trying to get to teaching quality. It will be absolutely part of the access and participation plans that each university will have to produce, the first draft of which we will need to see by August.

Q291 **Chair:** In terms of the review that the Government has announced, although they did not say this in the Chamber, there were media reports suggesting that fees would be cut for certain arts degrees and humanities degrees. What do you think of that?

Sir Michael Barber: The review is independent and they should look at the evidence and make some recommendations to the Government. I was on the original Browne Committee that recommended this report in 2010, and then the Government made some adjustments to it. I have been, I suppose, surprised—but perhaps not when I look back with hindsight—at the lack of variation in the fee levels. The vast majority of institutions are charging the maximum fee. We did not expect that to be the case on the Browne Review, but the £9,000 cap was not our recommendation. That was a Government recommendation at the time and I understand why that happened. I would like to see more variation in the fees charged.

Q292 **Chair:** Should the variation be in areas where we have big skills deficits in our country? We have got rid of the student nurse bursary, for example. We have huge deficits in women in STEM, in coding, engineering, teachers and so on. Surely if you are going to have differential fees it should be in those areas where we desperately need to incentivise people.

Sir Michael Barber: There are a whole range of factors here, to think about what we want to incentivise, to think about what is affordable for students, and to think about value for money. As you know, under the current arrangements—and we are inheriting those on 1 April—the TEF grant that has been a hefty grant at one £1.3 billion adjusts so that you



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never pay more than £9,250 even if you do science, or physics, or medicine, but the actual cost of the course is more. We are already, in the way you are describing, subsidising some courses because they are more expensive to teach. Those things can all be looked at with variations. As you know, for degree apprenticeships the student does not pay anything. We should look at those incentives for sure.

Q293 Chair: On the £860 million that I asked the previous panel about, do you think that is being spent well?

Sir Michael Barber: That is what these access and participation plans need to get at. We have to make sure that is spent better.

Q294 Chair: What would spending better mean? Give me an example.

Sir Michael Barber: Anna Vignoles said it was a mixed bag. That is what I think. We need to look at the incentives for universities to think about access, progression through university and into the labour market. I would like to see much more integrated thinking on access, success and progression through schools, colleges, universities and employers. I would like to think about this as a set of pathways from age 14 to 24. If you are in a Gateshead school and somebody unlocks your aspiration, is it the degree apprenticeship pathway?

One of the big mis-turnings in educational history in this country was exactly 100 years ago when the Fisher Education Act required that every student aged 14 to 18 had to be at least in part-time education. At that time the school leaving age was 14. That section of the Act was then not implemented because of the Geddes cuts in 1921. We have to get to a point where we think about this as a set of progressions into the labour market. It might be through university, it might be through part-time courses, it might be through colleges, or it might be through degree apprenticeships. But we have to get the schools, the colleges, the employers and the universities thinking holistically about this from the student perspective. We have not done well enough. That is why a lot of the £800 million is not spent as well as it might be.

Q295 Ian Mearns: Do you think universities could re-invent an Aimhigher programme for students from poorer backgrounds?

Sir Michael Barber: Yes, as was debated in the previous session. I am a bit biased because I was partly involved in the design of that when I was working in the Browne administration and I think it was a successful programme. Something like that but more ambitious, bold, and building on it would absolutely be a fantastic thing. We really as a country need to take a big initiative in this area. The board of the OFS know that I have been emphasising this from the first board meeting.

Q296 Ian Mearns: People talk to me because I am a member of the Education Select Committee. It is amazing how many people I talk to and I talk to them about the missed opportunity of the Tomlinson review back in 2004. Do you think we should be thinking about something of that



nature? You are talking about 14 to 24 progression.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. The Tomlinson review we can debate. I remember speaking at the north England conference in Gateshead in 1996 and talking about supporting students not just to get good academic qualifications, but to get good opportunities for out-of-school learning.

Q297 **Ian Mearns:** Yes. We had a good Chair of the Education Committee back then.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. It was a wonderful Chair. Yes. It was a great event. There are lots of ideas out there. We have to do something big and bold, and we have to do it urgently. We have to make sure that £800 million is spent well and we have to think holistically, as I think one of the previous panel members was saying.

Q298 **Ian Mearns:** The Aimhigher programme is a fraction of that, isn't it, in terms of the £860 million?

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. That was Government funded, but this £860 million is divided among hundreds of universities.

Q299 **Ian Mearns:** There is a vacuum there; that is what I am saying. The universities with their resource could be thinking about that sort of programme collectively between them.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. In Harlow, or Gateshead, or wherever you are we can see much better collaboration among the different institutions. We have to think about it from the student perspective and the ways through. At the moment it is a muddle, and it is confusing, and the information, advice and guidance is not good enough.

Q300 **Chair:** I think I mentioned nine out of 24 Russell Group universities having less state school pupils than before. If you see one of those universities underperforming in that way, how will the OFS grade it or react?

Sir Michael Barber: We will look at more than one data point, obviously, and we will look at more than one indicator—it might be social indicators; it might be black and minority ethnic; it might be gender indicators. We will look at all of those. It does not matter whether they are Russell Group or not; if they are underperforming in this area we will be challenging them for sure. We can reject their plan. We have the powers that I mentioned previously. One of the great things about having powers is that often you do not have to use them because you can use the threat of them.

Q301 **Chair:** If you had to use the powers, give me an example. Let us say a university underperformed in terms of social disadvantage for a couple of years. What could you do in practice?

Sir Michael Barber: If they set out a plan that was then totally inadequately implemented, the first thing we would want to do is talk to



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them and say, "Do you realise what you set out in the plan? We are very, very disappointed by the progress, as indeed you must be. What are you going to do about it?" Then beyond that we can fine them. That would be probably the first place you would go. Then there are further powers beyond that if it went on and on.

Q302 **Chair:** What are the further powers?

Sir Michael Barber: Ultimately, you can withdraw registration. Remember, by the end of August we will have the first ever register of every higher education institution in this country.

Q303 **Chair:** Will social disadvantage be a key thing?

Sir Michael Barber: It will. It is in the regulatory framework. It is one of the conditions. Absolutely.

Q304 **Emma Hardy:** I wonder if it is time to get even tougher than that. Do you think there is a possibility that the OFS could set quotas for universities to say, "So many of the people you admit have to be from certain backgrounds," or, "So many of the people you admit for a STEM course have to be female"? Do you think it is time to get that firm about it?

Sir Michael Barber: It is hard to know what would be tougher than withdrawing registration.

Q305 **Emma Hardy:** It means to set quotas to begin with. "As a clear target you should have this percentage from disadvantaged backgrounds, so many should be from—"

Sir Michael Barber: Here is the dilemma—this is a really good conversation to have—I personally believe, and indeed Parliament enacted last year in the Higher Education and Research Act, that institutional autonomy is really important. That is very, very clear, and it is on the face of the Act on admissions, on curriculum, course design, and academic appointments. We, the OFS, have no role. I think we would struggle legally to be able to do what you are saying. That does not mean that we cannot have a big initiative in this area and a big push to make it better. Institutional autonomy is one of the precious things about higher education in this country. When you get into quotas you start stepping over the line, and that is where we would struggle with quotas.

Q306 **Emma Hardy:** Could the quotas not be used as a way of, on the other hand, rewarding or celebrating? Instead of saying, "You have to this quota", you could say, "If you met this quota you could have—" could it be the other way around, some way of rewarding it?

Sir Michael Barber: What we can use is benchmarking. We say, "Here is a range of universities. You are down at the bottom end of the scale. How do you feel about that?" There are lots of different ways into this.

Q307 **Ian Mearns:** Apart from inviting you back to this Committee, Sir



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Michael—I mean, you are always welcome.

Sir Michael Barber: I thought you were going to invite me to Gateshead.

Ian Mearns: Please. That would be lovely. By all means, I will show you an excellent FE college.

Chair: I can show you one in Harlow.

Ian Mearns: Apart from inviting you back here, how are we as a Committee and the wider field out there meant to hold you to account, do you think? What is the most effective way of that happening? For instance, do you intend that your board would publish its minutes as Ofsted do? Would you have something on your website—because there currently isn't—that highlights who the board are?

Sir Michael Barber: Remember that we do not exist formally until 3 April.

Q308 **Ian Mearns:** That will be on next Wednesday?

Sir Michael Barber: I think it is a good point. One of the things we said in the regulatory framework document that was published two or three weeks ago is that we are going to publish an annual report and we are going to make a big thing about it. We want to be held to account for that. I have made some big commitments to you in the past 20 minutes. They are very ambitious. I sit here and I think, "How are we going to get that done?" We are going to do everything we can, but these are difficult things to do. The annual report I would like.

I was thinking about Ofsted in the past, where you publish the annual report and have a lot of data in there on the key goals, some of which we have been debating. Then the chief executive and myself do a public meeting somewhere. You are all welcome. We can come here, obviously, if you summon us. We can do a public meeting and be held to account in a very public, visible way. I am very much in favour of what I call radical transparency. The more data we can put out there, the better. There is always an issue with transparency, because everybody is in favour of it, and everybody is also in favour of privacy and confidentiality. You have to manage this dilemma.

We would like to put more and more data out there. We want to be held to account. I want to be challenged by all of you and, indeed, by the students of this generation and the next generation.

Q309 **Chair:** Could I just ask a couple of final questions? Given the forthcoming fourth industrial revolution, with robotics and artificial intelligence affecting all of us, whether working class or middle class, in a big way that we cannot yet possibly imagine, how geared up do you think our higher education system is to prepare for that?



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Sir Michael Barber: That question can be summarised as: how can higher education prepare for something that none of us can possibly imagine? That is quite a tough question. I think there is more to do in this area. It can apply to the quality of teaching. Some of the forefront of research is going on at universities in Britain. I happen to know about research in artificial intelligence in Oxford but there are places across this country that are really at the forefront of this. We need universities to be thinking about what that means. We also need others then to be experimenting with how you can use that to improve the quality of teaching; improve the quality of a whole range of things, including information, advice and guidance.

Here is the thing I would want to emphasise on this: one of my personal anxieties about the state of the modern world—of which there are many, and I am sure we share some of them—is that the science and the biomedicine, for example artificial intelligence, is running ahead of the ethics. The universities are the places where we think about the ethics. When I think about this area, I worry about the ethical frameworks that we are putting in place, and there is nowhere better than our best universities to think about that.

Q310 **Chair:** Also on the skill side? That is why I go on about degree apprenticeships. There are many reasons but the fact is that you will want people with high-level skills more so than ever before. We are already behind the rest of the developing world in many ways in terms of skills.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. By the way, we have not debated it in this session or the previous one, but the way in which the funding raised by the apprenticeship levy feeds into all of this really needs thinking through. I totally agree that skills are going to be important. The way I summarise it is that the mid-21st century is going to be a fantastic place for people who are well educated, confident and have the character and motivation to take charge of their lives and contribute to their communities, families and so on. If you are uneducated or lacking in confidence, it is going to be a terrifying place. We do really need to address it.

Q311 **Chair:** Do you think at some stage we will need to look at the role of A levels and maybe have a Baccalaureate at 18 that is much wider, so you do not just focus on two or three subjects but have a mix and match between creativity, design and technology, science, and so on?

Sir Michael Barber: Ian raised the Tomlinson REVIEW, which did suggest moving in this direction in 2004. I do think that at some point we need to think about a wider range of qualifications. That is why in answer to a previous question I was talking about thinking about this from 14 to 24. It is still the standard route that you get three good A Levels and go to a “good” university. There are many ways through this. BTECs, for example, are increasingly taken into account in university entrance.



Q312 **Chair:** A lot of universities do not take them into account, sadly.

Sir Michael Barber: No, but they could. I have to be careful, because I used to work for Pearson. I am not promoting a particular qualification here but I do think we need to look at a wider range of routes through for students from 14 to 24, and what has become the standard route through sixth form A-levels and into an academic course is not necessarily the best for everybody, nor should it be the only route. There should be a wide variety of routes through.

Q313 **Chair:** Thank you. If I can just speak personally, I found your evidence incredibly encouraging for the most part. You have been subjected to sustained questioning on a huge area of subjects from all of us. I wish you—I am sure we all do—every possible success in your new role. I look forward to you writing to us about FE and the other issues, apprentice panels and so on.

Sir Michael Barber: Yes. The thing we were going to write about was specifically how we would involve the FE perspective in our decision making?

Q314 **Chair:** FE on the board, and also having a degree apprentice panel alongside a student panel.

Sir Michael Barber: Good. I am more than happy to be held to account by your Committee at any time in the future, if it suits you.

Chair: Thank you. Much appreciated.