

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 341

Wednesday 15 May 2019

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Ben Bradley; Marion Fellows; James Frith; Trudy Harrison; Ian Mearns; Lucy Powell; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 2084 - 2146

Witnesses

I: Chris Skidmore MP, Minister of State for Universities, Department for Education, and Matt Toombs, Director of Student Finance.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Chris Skidmore MP and Matt Toombs.

Q2084 **Chair:** Just before we start, James and Trudy want to say something.

James Frith: I will just bring my colleagues' attention to my entry in the register of interests. I am on the advisory board for Whatuni, which is a comparison site for universities and is owned by IDP Connect, which is an international education organisation.

Trudy Harrison: Thank you, Chair. Just to declare that I am an apprenticeship ambassador appointed by the DfE.

Q2085 **Chair:** As I have mentioned to you privately, Minister, I have to apologise because I have to leave early, as there has been a serious case of sexual assault in my constituency. Mr Speaker has granted me the right to raise it in Westminster Hall and my constituent will be there. I do apologise, but we have the brilliant Ian Mearns, who is going to take over as Chair after I leave.

Just for the benefit of the tape and for those watching on the internet, could you kindly introduce yourselves and your titles? Please recognise that the acoustics are not brilliant in this place, so could you speak very clearly? Thank you.

Chris Skidmore: I am Chris Skidmore, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation.

Matt Toombs: I am Matt Toombs. I am Director of Student Finance at the Department for Education.

Q2086 **Chair:** Thank you both for coming today. We know that the Government say that more disadvantaged pupils access higher education than ever before, but UCAS's multiple equality measure shows that 12.3% of students in the most disadvantaged group access higher education compared with 56.3% of the least advantaged groups. Access rates for some cohorts are pretty dreadful—they are just 11.8% for looked-after children—and we know that the number in state schools in the past year who go to university has remained pretty static. We also know that the dropout levels of those on free school meals who do go to university are much higher than their more wealthy peers.

We also know that our universities and Office for Students spend around £817 million on outreach. Some of those barriers are linked to poor attainment, but some relate to the lack of good quality support advice. For instance, around 1,000 high-performing disadvantaged pupils are under-matched every year—that is, they go to worse universities than their grades unlock. How confident are you that all of the £817 million spent on outreach goes to good use, and what are the Government doing to tighten up on outreach targets?

Chris Skidmore: Chair, thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak to the Committee today. Since being appointed as Universities



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Minister on 5 December last year, I have begun to set out some of my priorities in a series of speeches. I am sure we will come on to one of those, which is looking at how we can better create a combined pathway for post-18-year-olds across both FE and HE, and how we can ensure that the system is more flexible in its approach.

I think it does touch upon how we can ensure that more disadvantaged pupils can access a post-18 system and can see career pathways in front of them in order to have a more flexible form of learning if they go into work first. I think, in principle, when we look at the structural disadvantages of the English HE education system, it may be that it is predominantly too weighted towards the focus on 18-year-olds directly from school going to university.

That then creates a cycle by which a disproportionate number of disadvantaged pupils are not able to consider higher education as an opportunity for them. There is no shortage of talent across the country. There is a shortage of opportunities in geographic regions. I have made it a priority of mine to look at and redouble down on the issues of access and participation.

Obviously, I have come to the job with HERA, with access and participation plans being published, with the guidance being published. I am very keen, with universities, on working towards these access and participation plans.

Q2087 Chair: Just a small proportion of outreach targets focus on outcomes rather than inputs, and some of the targets are completely unambitious. Is there a case for looking at how this money is being spent? Could it be spent in a very different way? For example, let's say you used half of it to give bursaries to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to do degree apprentices. That might be a much greater ladder of opportunity to university or to higher education than the way that £817 million is spent with very little tracking, very little data or analysis. Is that £817 million making a difference—given the figures I have quoted—to getting more disadvantaged pupils to university?

Chris Skidmore: Yes, I entirely agree. When it comes to the spend on access participation, we need a more strategic and systemic approach to how that is spent nationally. You have good pockets of best practice that are taking place. You have NCOPs being established by the OfS, looking at regional areas of how we can bring together universities to collaborate. I think there is one issue around collaboration versus competition: how do you ensure universities work together to raise those aspirations and awareness of routes into HE at a far earlier age?

I have met a group of access and participation charities to discuss with them—these are the charities that are working with schoolchildren—how to demonstrate that HE should be a route for those students. I am interested in saying, "You have lots of universities with access and participation plans spending money. Where is their duplication? Where



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can we look at what might be a better national framework?" We have the evidence in impact exchange—that is between Nottingham Trent and King's College London—and the behavioural insight group that has been set up that will indeed be looking at this area of best practice.

Going forwards, we have access as an issue and we focused on that in the past 15 years or so, getting more students into university. We are still only at 33% but we now include the participation. I think this is going to mushroom out, so what I am keen to look at is what I call a student transition, experience and progress framework, where we can map out those outcomes right the way through to graduation, because if you have a disadvantaged student going to university and then they drop out, they are worse off than if they had never gone to university at all.

Q2088 Chair: Are you saying you will do a review of how that £800 million is spent and proper data analysis to see how it could be spent better?

Chris Skidmore: The Evidence and Impact Exchange and the work that OfS is taking forwards, I am very keen on. There is partly an issue. You have mentioned data that is being used by UCAS. A lot of universities are still using POLAR data that I think is relatively inadequate to be able to judge disadvantage, particularly in London, for example. Just because you live in an area that is classed as very disadvantaged, you can be someone from a wealthy background and be given a contextual offer on the basis of that, so data is important.

Q2089 Chair: In a nutshell, will you do a review and proper data analysis, evidence-based, to see how that £817 million is being spent?

Chris Skidmore: Yes. What I have set up is an HE data advisory committee to work with me on all these areas, where obviously a large number of organisations are producing evidence to be able to prove that we do have a fragmented system when it comes to access and participation and what we can do to draw that together. It is important that the Evidence and Impact Exchange is given a chance to also be able to participate in this debate but, absolutely, it is a priority on how we can expand and increase this agenda.

Chair: Can I just gently ask you—we have a lot to get through—to be concise, if you can? I know there is a lot to say.

Chris Skidmore: All right. I will try my best.

Chair: I know you have a lot to say.

Chris Skidmore: Yes, I am very keen.

Q2090 Chair: We are talking about social justice, particularly part-time learners. There have been lots of debates playing out in the press about the Augar review, and some of my colleagues will touch on this a bit later, but relatively little has been said about part-time learning. We know that the Open University is the primary provider of higher education in prison secure units. It is hugely important to part-time learners. They feel they



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do not get enough support from the Government. The introduction of the fee change has had a huge impact on the number of people who study part-time.

Just to give you some stats, since 2012-13 the number of part-time learners in England starting a first degree has decreased by around one quarter—from 182,720 to 135,100—and the number starting other undergraduate courses at levels 4 and 5 has decreased by nearly half, at 44%, in the same period. What are you doing to encourage more part-time learners to reverse the decline? It is incredibly important, given the age of automation, the march of the robots. We need a reskilled population. Are you going to consider reinstating a measure of financial support for the most disadvantaged part-time students?

Chris Skidmore: We already have had OfS give an additional £72 million to recognise the additional costs of part-time study in the teaching grant. Going forwards, we have removed the equivalent or lower restrictions, the ELQ, on students who want to study science and technology and maths. I entirely agree: when you look at the Diamond review in Wales and what has been done there, it is undeniable there has been a decline in the number of part-time learners. It needs to be reversed, particularly when it comes to an element of retraining.

I am interested, obviously, in how we can create more flexible models of learning, so we have introduced the two-year degree regulations that were passed this year. I want to be able to build on that, whether it is through looking at more modular-based learning, microprudentials, and indeed being able to look at the degree apprenticeships routes to ensure that people can cope with still being in the world of work.

I do not deny that there is an issue around maintenance. We have been able to increase certain aspects of that maintenance, but when it comes to distance learning, for example, we have not been able to proceed with that because there are issues around its economic viability and also the ability to effectively maintain the security of the loan around issues of fraud.

Absolutely, I do recognise that we are going to have to tackle this challenge if we are going to be able to be productive internationally. We have made some progress, but we definitely have more to do.

Q2091 **Chair:** Following on from my previous question, we know that we have a huge skills deficit. One third of England's 16 to 19-year-olds have low basic skills, and 9 million adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills. Do you not agree that we have become obsessed with full academic degrees and that the labour market does not necessarily need an ever-growing supply of academic degrees, because one fifth and one third of our graduates take non-graduate jobs and the graduate premium varies quite wildly, subject to an institution?

Chris Skidmore: With this particular issue I do believe that going forwards into the future internationally we are seeing a rise towards more



young people wanting to have a degree, because it provides portability to be able to travel and for their qualification to be recognised. We have 33% of people going to HE, 49% of people by the age of 30 getting a degree, so obviously there is that sort of demand as people go through their 20s, and I think it is important that we do not turn around and say, "Oh, there are too many people doing degrees, therefore they should not have a degree". It is about at what stage they need a degree.

Q2092 Chair: There are a huge amount of graduates not getting graduate jobs at the end. Surely there is something wrong.

Chris Skidmore: The early cuts of the longitudinal education outcomes data obviously demonstrate there are a variety of graduate outcomes for certain courses and students from certain universities. We are very keen to look at issues around low value and low quality in order to make sure that students are getting value for money when it comes to doing their degree, but I would not want to ever suggest that it is not worthwhile having a degree; 95% of students who graduate are then in employment or in further postgraduate education.

Q2093 Chair: What about introducing more balance in the higher education level offering so that there are pathways into intermediate and higher technical education?

Chris Skidmore: Yes, I think this must be the future. In my first speech at RADA in January, on getting rid of this artificial divide between FE and HE, I said I would like to see more HE institutions offering level 4 and 5 courses. I would also like more FE institutions being given the freedom to have degree-awarding powers, where at the moment they are not able to do so because of the franchising model.

Q2094 Chair: Will the Department commit to providing the FE sector, first, with strong guidance that it would like more to do higher education and work with universities, but also give the financial boost they need? Because we know that funding for further education is much lower and has suffered much more than both our school and higher education system.

Chris Skidmore: The post-18 review was established to be able to recognise the need to strengthen FE, the technical vocational side of post-18 education. It is a tragedy if we simply just think it is going to be all about focusing on the HE side whenever the report is published. I want to make sure that we recognise the Government are equally committed to ensuring those learners who may not see HE as a route for them to start with may want to start on an FE path and work their way through as it seems best for them.

Q2095 Chair: Can I ask, as you are here—if you do not mind me calling you by your first name, Matthew—can you confirm publicly that a significant part of the Augar review will be about further education and its link to higher-quality education and degrees in universities in supporting further education?



Matt Toombs: Yes, I can confirm that the terms of reference for the post-18 review are absolutely clear that the review is to cover the whole of post-18. That is further education as well as higher education. One of the key issues that is raised in the terms of reference is the focus and predominance of three-year degrees in post-18 education and the importance of developing technical education routes as alternatives, so absolutely that is the core part of the task the review has set.

Q2096 **Chair:** My colleague will come on to degree apprenticeships in more detail later. There are three main players when it comes to introducing degree apprenticeships: employers, higher education institutions and the Institute for Apprenticeships. The universities tell us there is—and we published a report on this, on value for money in higher education—enormous bureaucracy in trying to make degree apprentices a success. Which of the three institutions—the IFA, the employers, the higher education institutions—do you think are blocking the path to more degree apprenticeships? How has this happened and what is the relative weight of responsibility?

Chris Skidmore: There are two issues for me. This is me speaking, having gone around about 30 universities so far and seeing some absolutely fantastic examples of degree apprenticeships. I could not commend them enough in terms of trying to expand. There are about 25,000 now this year in total, I think 14,000 starts this year, so that has gone up from 10,880 in the previous year.

I think there are two barriers. One is obviously around the apprenticeship standards and making sure that we can continue to develop those and that question: what is a level 6-plus apprenticeship versus a degree apprenticeship? I am keen to ensure that we have degree apprenticeships and obviously level 6 apprenticeships that we do not cut off, and that we do not make it an either/or for some of these subjects.

Q2097 **Chair:** What are you doing to end the blockages and rocket boost degree apprentices? In a nutshell, what is the Department doing to encourage a lot more? It is good, but it is only 10,874 starts in 2017-18.

Chris Skidmore: There are issues around the levy. Another barrier I wanted to mention was around SMEs, because the big institutional blockage I think for two-year apprentices is those SMEs cannot give a student a day off to study, so I think the work that needs to be done is how we can create a modular system in the degree apprenticeships that will say, "How can we have flexibility for learning?" You have large organisations like Siemens up in Manchester who sponsor degree apprenticeships. They see the value of it.

I can see how transformative they are, but I think we are going to have to look at the apprenticeship standards and at the same time look at how we can mould that around the working lives of these students in SMEs if we are going to be able to see a supply side increase. That is also an issue that I would raise personally. Degree apprenticeships technically sit



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within the portfolio brief of the FE Minister, and obviously I can comment as HE Minister on the landscape, but the actual policy formulation—

Q2098 Chair: Are you doing what you can to encourage universities and remove the blockages to support—

Chris Skidmore: Yes. For me it is across this portfolio of trying to break down—so I see that we are going to be at a stage where one day, less than half of students will be taking a three-year degree. That is the model at the moment, but I am keen to create a wider menu of options so that degree apprenticeships is one route and then students can clearly see. There is also a clear issue around information about careers and making it available in schools. Some students switch degree apprenticeships, but they only do so when they arrived at university because they do not know about it as a route to start with and so that is something we also need to tackle.

Q2099 Chair: But you are personally pushing degree apprenticeships? I know, as you say, that the majority of that role is with the Apprenticeships Minister, but are you personally pushing and supporting it?

Chris Skidmore: Yes, absolutely. The two-year degree model as not just a case of trying to get someone through a two-year degree ASAP; there is also the opportunity for sandwich courses, for placement years. I am going to Aston on Friday and 70% of all students on their courses have a placement as part of the course.

The OECD—I am sure you are aware of this—obviously picked up on this in the UK HE system, that it does not prepare for the resilience and the graduate employability skills that are needed for the future, so the courses need to adapt themselves to be able to be more work-based.

Q2100 Chair: Finally, just before I pass on to my colleagues, I would like to ask you how you think you can measure what a good university is. My feeling—and some of this was reflected in our Select Committee report on value for money in universities—is that less reputable institutions go unrecognised, even though they add incredible value relative to an individual's starting point. A higher-tier university finds it easier to support a student into positive labour market destinations than other universities do, but it is much harder to support pupils who have had tough lives and started with lower grades to a strong position in the labour market. Surely this should be reflected in the way we measure success.

There are some universities who have huge amounts of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds—often their families are on very low salaries—and achieve remarkable results. Yet because they are not necessarily part of the Russell Group, they are not regarded as an elite university, even though they have good graduate outcomes and often do great work on skills and degree apprenticeships. What is your view about that?



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Chris Skidmore: I tend to think sometimes we beat our system up, so we create the Russell Group and then we say, “We have the post-92s”, and we have this sort of horrible legacy where people say, “Oh well, that university was a former poly”, as if it is some sort of smear. That was nearly 30 years ago.

The statistic that I am always keen to put on record is that 97% of all our universities in the UK are in the top 5% worldwide, and when it comes to looking at the challenges that some universities do with students and what they put in place, whether it is Kingston University with its care leavers programme, whether it is looking at Huddersfield University—where I was last Friday—with its BAME ambassador programme, those have made it a priority to change and transform students’ lives. That needs to be recognised.

We have this review of the TEF by Dame Shirley Pearce that is going on at the moment. Obviously the TEF has the teaching evaluation framework, but I think it should be looking far more at the student experience.

Q2101 **Chair:** What plans does the Department have to recognise that universities provide significant value added?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to the opportunity of the OfS to look at organisations that have gone through registration conditions, specific conditions on universities to improve where they do not add value, that can be across several levels. It could be across the quality of the qualification, but it can also be about the quality of the access and participation, so it is very important that we make that public and that the transparency duty that has been placed on institutions as a result of HERA will make it clear.

I have a meeting this week with league table compilers to look at how we can better show what is value, for instance, when it comes to BAME participation so that universities are going to be judged on this.

Q2102 **Chair:** And disadvantaged low income backgrounds when universities are achieving good outcomes—they are not recognised in the system because a Russell Group university is regarded as a prestigious university and anything else is less prestigious. That surely is the wrong way of looking at things.

Chris Skidmore: Yes. The problem we have always had is this confluence of research and teaching. That teaching and the quality of teaching is vital in being able to create productive citizens for the future. Some of the work that is being done across the university sector is valuable and I am very keen that we do not beat up on HE and follow the *Daily Mail* headlines to somehow suggest that some universities are institutionally weaker than others. There are improvements that need to be made in the quality of teaching, the quality of courses, but the institutions themselves should be supported to be able to thrive.



Q2103 Ben Bradley: Good morning. I want to touch on the institutional autonomy of HE providers. There seems to have been a shift around the introduction of the Act. The former Secretary of State back in 2016 talked about autonomy being the bedrock of success of the HE sector and talked about the Act safeguarding that autonomy. Since then your predecessor Minister has talked about needing more accountability, needing more engagement from the DfE, discussions around getting involved in admissions policy, getting involved in pay regulation, so is that autonomy something that is important? Has the Act itself changed where the Government's position sits on the autonomy of universities?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to autonomy, one of the great success stories of universities is that they are not public sector. Obviously, they take taxpayers' money, which they have to be held accountable for and to demonstrate value, but that is why they are world class and world leading—because they have been able to establish themselves within the local communities. They know what is best for their local communities.

When it comes to this issue around the Act and the legislation, obviously you have institutional autonomy, but there is also within the Act the need to be balanced, both at the OfS and Secretary of State level, at risks to the quality of the student experience. There are ways in which you can have regard to institutional autonomy, but at the same time the Secretary of State can be entitled to require the OfS to take action.

The OfS can take action that may on the face of it look like it is impinging on autonomy, but you cannot have autonomy being absolutely sacrosanct, somehow washing over and disregarding all aspects of the student experience, because those are the people who pay the fees and those are the people who deserve a good education. It is about getting that balance right. The OfS has regard to autonomy, but it must also have regard to the other pillars within its mission.

Q2104 Ben Bradley: Do you think the OfS is getting that right currently?

Chris Skidmore: The OfS's work has been predominantly around registration this year, so it has registered about 352 providers. The act of registration itself provides a lever through which you can frame some of the individual university approaches. They cannot then charge fees if they are not registered. Most of them have been registered, but their registration conditions have been placed on them and they will be judged on those registration conditions in order to be able to improve access.

Also, those access and participation plans were just taken through two SIs in the last two weeks to put the final pieces of HERA into place. Some of those measures are uncomfortable, but they are absolutely vital. One of them is around the issue of universities being fined if they do not meet their registration conditions or don't adapt to their access and participation plans, but that is very much a last resort.



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I see the OfS just in the same way around financial sustainability at universities, being able to work with them, pointing to the failures or inadequacies that these universities may present and being able to help them get across the line rather than publicly naming and shaming them and using that fining power, but it has to be there if it is going to be an effective regulator.

Q2105 Ben Bradley: How much should the Secretary of State be able to lead that, or is that for the OfS to independently decide?

Chris Skidmore: The Secretary of State has this sort of annual guidance letter; then, in addition to that, the Secretary of State can provide guidance to the OfS to take further action. That is where we come back to the issue of autonomy. It is written specifically into HERA that when the Secretary of State issues guidance, it must have regard to institutional autonomy.

The debate is around if the Secretary of State issues further guidance to the OfS to take action, whether it is on unconditional offers or on issues around vice-chancellor pay, he has to be able to make a case that there is a risk to students' educational outcomes or to financial sustainability. Autonomy can only be overcome if there are real and serious issues that the Secretary of State believes need to be tackled.

Q2106 Ben Bradley: You mentioned the widening access programme there and I am going to squeeze in a different question while I have the opportunity. I met recently with DANCOP, who are our Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Outreach Partnership. They sat in my office and said, "I have X million to spend and I need your help to spend it", because the criteria is so tight that in my constituency, which is the most deprived part of Nottinghamshire, there are only about 12 kids that qualify for it and only at one school. That struck me as crazy, to be honest, given the amount. I think it was something in the region of nearly £3 million that they were struggling to spend to support the most deprived kids in Nottinghamshire to attend university.

I just wondered what your thoughts on that were and whether there might need to be some intervention in terms of that criteria and how we can make that money work for people, because it is literally sat unused.

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree. I am very conscious that I do not want the target to become a measure that then eats itself in terms of then saying, "Universities are only going to focus on POLAR level 4 and disregard everybody else". NCOP has been set up to provide that sort of regional collaboration, but it is by raising awareness and, not ambitions but opportunities across maybe an entire class that then you are going to be able to demonstrate to those disadvantaged students that they should be on the same pathway as everybody else. The last thing I want is these organisations plucking pupils out of classes, taking them off to be seen as somehow different. I think that is something we have to be careful about.



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The OfS has obviously created frameworks by which it is looking to universities to raise their standards. It is right that you have to start somewhere. Where we are with the universities is very much where we are with the national frameworks on reading that David Blunkett set up 15 to 20 years ago. It was right to be able to demonstrate the scale of the challenge that the Chairman set within geographic regions.

One of the most challenging statistics in the north-east is that only 9% of white working-class males go to university. That is the second lowest, compared with the 6% of care leavers, so when it comes to those issues, by all means let's open up the door to transparency, but then you have data, and then the next best thing to do is to come up with effective measures. I am hoping that when the Evidence and Impact Exchange is launched this month, it will be able to highlight this issue, and also around collaboration versus competition, making sure universities are not poaching students and deciding not to spend money only on students to come to their universities.

Lots of universities recognise their regional co-operation. In Nottingham and Nottingham Trent they work very well. They do not care where the students go, as long as they realise their aspirations post-18, but they need to make sure that happens everywhere.

Q2107 Ben Bradley: I echo that. Those discussions locally in Nottinghamshire have been fantastic with the universities. I think the figure in Mansfield is only about 12% in terms of university attendance as well. You mentioned the POLAR measures there. Do you think universities have enough access to data, and could there be more in terms of what could be fed to them through UCAS? A number have spoken to me about not really knowing, frankly, who they should be targeting. Some of the criteria seem too tight and some of the measures seem not to pick out the right students. Is there an argument, whether it is through UCAS or through the OfS, for being able to give the universities more, say for being able to pick out children on the pupil premium, for example, or can we improve that?

Chris Skidmore: Yes. When I became Universities Minister, I was struck by the lack of data and data outcomes in some areas. For instance, there are very little data on those people who are the first person in their family to go to university. How can we track that more effectively as well? Part of it is obviously around data security and getting the data from students themselves or the schools being able to pass it on. That is one reason why I have set up the advisory committee. You have HESA data, you have Unistats data and you have UCAS data. How can we ensure that that is broken down at a regional level most effectively? I think that is going to be one of the most current challenges in order to be able to implement further reform. Absolutely, yes.

Q2108 Lucy Powell: Thanks, Minister. I think you have given some good answers and you are covering a very impressive range of issues. I just want to talk to you about some things in relation to admissions and social justice therein. First—you have touched on this a bit already—



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unconditional offers have been in the spotlight a bit lately because the figures have gone up from 1% in 2003 to nearly 35% last year. Do you think that is a right and fair way for universities to offer out places?

Chris Skidmore: I would like to make the distinction between unconditional offers and conditional unconditional offers, because I think there is a place for unconditional offers, particularly where universities want to target disadvantaged students or want to target certain WP groups, the care leavers. There are students who have mental health issues as well going through sixth form, where having that unconditional offer is the right thing.

What I want to make sure happens is that it is all about the students, so the student still has the maximum range of opportunities by the time they finish year 13. Conditional unconditional offers, where a university would say, "We will give you an unconditional offer, but you need to tell us now in order to get your accommodation place", I do not think is fair on those individual students. We have seen anecdotal evidence also of that putting additional pressure on students.

Some universities have recognised that, such as Nottingham and St Mary's, Twickenham. They have stopped using unconditional offers. The Secretary of State wrote to 23 universities where the increase has been particularly pronounced. There is a debate, and some universities would say, "Conditional unconditional offers work for us", but again, a bit like VC pay, I think the sector has a responsibility to recognise that, as you say, there is a sudden rise in these. We want to be able to look at admissions in the round and how we can look more widely at contextual admissions in order to be able to draw disadvantaged students into higher education.

Q2109 **Lucy Powell:** So it is something you are keeping an eye on, and you are going to keep on at those universities where you have seen a spike.

Chris Skidmore: The OfS published a report in January and it has highlighted this issue of pressure selling. It must be student-focused. We can have a debate around the system, but I am keen that we follow the student through and say we would not want to end unconditional offers in their entirety. It might suddenly create an additional problem in recruiting those students who—

Q2110 **Lucy Powell:** Moving on to contextual admissions, you will have seen from our recent report on higher education that we recommended a stronger move towards contextual admissions. Notwithstanding what you have said about data, although we did explore that in those evidence sessions, the data are there for someone from a more deprived background or on pupil premium, who has perhaps gone to a more challenging secondary school, who has gone on to get equivalent grades of somebody else, but then is not getting the offer from the top universities. What is your view on contextual admissions? Do you want to see that as a key driver to delivering more social justice in our university



system?

Chris Skidmore: There is definitely a place for contextual offers. I had a long chat with Chris Millwood and he is exploring this. He has looked at work the University of Texas has done. He is very committed to taking it forwards. It would be a paradigm shift because, traditionally, it has always been like, "How can one group of students be given a different set of criteria to enter university compared with another? Aren't you creating apples and pears?" Trying to shape that narrative is going to be key if it is going to succeed.

At the same time—this is where I would come back to this issue of what is an elite university and the work of Bob Kerslake with the UPP Foundation on civic universities—we have to be able to break this corrosive cycle of universities saying, "The quality of school education is not up to us; it is down to the schools", and the schools turning around and saying, "That is not our responsibility because we are focusing on SATs and exams".

It must be a marriage in the local area between the universities that recognise their civic mission to work with pupils, and I think it should be at a lot earlier age. All the debate around admissions and careers advice being at sixth form is too late. It needs to be right back down at year 9, if not earlier. That is the challenge about how we get to that and maybe then a strategy that recognises that contextual admissions must be placed in that as well.

Q2111 **Lucy Powell:** It does need a paradigm shift, doesn't it? You mention civic responsibility. This Committee loves Warwick University because we visited there, but yesterday it went even further—and further than anyone else—in terms of its contextual admissions: a 30-mile radius for deprived local children and a potential four-grade difference it would look at. They say that is very strongly evidence-based.

There still is a significant advantage for well-off, often privately educated children in accessing higher education over their disadvantaged peers. Contextual admissions, properly done, would be potentially a game-changer. Not that we are chasing headlines on this Committee, but what did you think of Anthony Wallersteiner's bemoaning in *The Times* earlier in the week that there is somehow a conspiracy against independent schools now in getting into universities?

Chris Skidmore: I disagree. I probably should put on record that I went to an independent grammar school.

Lucy Powell: There is no judgment on you or anybody else.

Chris Skidmore: With the registration conditions for certain of those Russell Group universities, it is being put to them that they need to be able to do more to be able to raise their performance of state entry, of disadvantaged pupils.



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Q2112 Lucy Powell: We are still a long way off, aren't we? He was bemoaning Oxbridge. The independent sector represents 7% of students and they still get 40% of the places. It is hardly social engineering against those private schools, is it?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree. I taught at Bristol University and it previously had a large private school intake. What it has tried to do is look at scholarship routes in areas of Hartcliffe in south Bristol, for instance, where you have an unconditional offer based into the scholarship. Some universities are really committed to that. You are changing the narrative to say, "You are an excellent university and a civic university and you can only be called one if you are doing this work". The balance is: do you go for a scholarship bursaries route or do you go for a complete system-wide change? I think the system-wide change is something we will need to be able to embrace to break this because the numbers are unjustifiable.

Q2113 Lucy Powell: They are. One of the reasons that we recommended it as part of our Committee's report was a pretty woeful performance by the VC of Oxford when we challenged her on some of these issues, with examples of students on pupil premium who had gone to tough, challenging inner-city secondary schools, who were on track to get A*s and As, who were not getting offers. We know the data: if you come from a more deprived background, if your parents perhaps have never been to university, if you go to a more challenging school system and you are still going to get really good grades, they are worth more, in my opinion. Do you not agree?

Chair: She is also opposed to Oxford opening up to degree apprenticeships as well, unlike Cambridge.

Lucy Powell: Not me, by the way—the VC.

Chair: I beg your pardon. The vice-chancellor of Oxford, unlike Cambridge, which has at least opened the door to degree apprenticeships. It is just very interesting, her attitude to all of it.

Lucy Powell: She just did not seem to accept that even if you got a B at A-level and you had had all of life's disadvantages thrown at you, that B was probably worth as good as an A* for somebody who had had all of life's advantages at a well-off independent school.

Chris Skidmore: I am on record as disagreeing with any minimum entry requirements and I will continue to say so.

Lucy Powell: Good. I was going to ask you about that.

Chris Skidmore: I was up at Huddersfield University last Friday. I hope the vice-chancellor will not mind me mentioning this, but he is a fellow of the Royal Society of Engineering and a renowned professor in his field, but he didn't get to three Ds at university. It is about recognising that life-long approach to learning that means that some people will develop, go to work. I have met so many cases where, to start with, that point



around the 18-year-old entry point is a false one, because we do need more mature learners. Adapting to that is going to be critical. We do need innovation.

Q2114 Chair: Will you encourage Oxford University to open the door to degree apprenticeships?

Chris Skidmore: Of course. I have not been up to Oxford yet. I have made it my priority to go to other universities apart from Oxbridge to start in terms of going around the country, but I want to make sure that we maintain our world-leading status in research and innovation and that we draw in those students who will then be ambassadors for universities in their local regions. It is cyclical, because you then basically just create the equivalent of the golden triangle in research. You have to be able to break that and move beyond it.

Q2115 Lucy Powell: Great. It is good to hear what you say about the D-grade entry level because I am also the MP for two fantastic universities and I think you have been already to Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan. They will say some of their best students who go on to do best come in through their foundation courses and they not make the D grade at A-level, but they have fantastic careers thereafter.

Just another final area in terms of this level playing field about admissions. You have probably heard me ask other colleagues of yours in other sessions and raise these issues around the perceived unfairness of the IGCSE, that independent schools are doing this international GCSE that is not regulated and is not regarded by the Department to be as robust as the formal GCSEs that state schools have to take.

Of people who sit them at largely independent schools, 70% of pupils get As or A*s in maths and English, whereas under the GCSEs—my son is doing his first GCSE today in English, as many others are—comparable outcomes mean that only 20% of students doing the normal GCSE can get A*s or As, yet universities are not distinguishing between these GCSEs when making offers. Obviously, GCSEs are quite a big part of what offer is made. Do you think that is something that more guidance should be issued on and that we should look at?

Chris Skidmore: I was not aware of that specific issue. Thank you for raising it with me. We have the opportunity to look and review admissions criteria. The Secretary of State has asked the OfS on the back of the issue around conditional unconditional offers to do that wider review. Working with UCAS, it is important that we do maintain that if there are loopholes, they are closed. I will definitely go away and—

Lucy Powell: Yes, I can write to you and let you know. That is fine. Thank you.

[IAN MEARNS *took the Chair.*]

Q2116 Mr William Wragg: Just a very quick devil's advocate question. Good



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morning. Why should universities be responsible for clearing up the mess of years of educational and social disadvantage?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to universities and their responsibility to wider areas and wider society, we have, as I think we all know, a societal fragmentation that is taking place, be it in the so-called name of populism. Then you get a narrative that begins that somehow universities are glass houses on a hill: why should they be attracting public money for the few, rather than the many? It is a narrative that I totally disagree with, but at the same time it is important that we counter it.

The very word “university” is “the whole, everything”. You used to have universities being established as bastions and pillars of their communities and I think universities recognise that they have to be able to bridge that divide to make the case both for higher education and for what they do. It is the same with science. Why should we be investing money in science and how do we show the public benefit in the future? It takes a long time for the investment made in pharmaceutical science to come down the pipeline to be able to show changes in drugs and patient outcomes.

For me, on universities being able to work with schools, they both share that common interest and passion in improving the lives of individuals. That mission extends into their local communities just as it extends nationally to being world leaders in research.

Q2117 Mr William Wragg: Do you find a hesitation from some universities or do they perceive a balance to be struck or indeed a barrier between the need for intellectual rigour and addressing social disadvantage?

Chris Skidmore: I think those two are not mutually exclusive. When it comes to excellence, excellence is to be found everywhere. Diversity, whether that is across disadvantaged backgrounds or whether that is across BAME backgrounds, provides new narratives and new perspectives, having those opportunities. Otherwise, any society or any institution that becomes closed loses the ability to innovate and loses the ability to be cutting-edge.

The odd thing is that when it comes to our grand challenges, a lot of those will only be met by focusing on those disadvantaged communities for the future. When it comes to five years extra healthy life, when it comes to looking at growth, both internationally and also locally, those universities that are able to recognise that there are different voices and different narratives are the ones that are going to be able to meet and adapt to those challenges. For me, having a monolithic approach becomes a monotonous one as well.

Q2118 Marion Fellows: Hello, good morning. I think it would probably be remiss of me not to refer to the Scottish education system and universities in Scotland, where there is some good work being done, where 40%, I think, is the latest admission for university after school.

Also, as a former FE lecturer, I was very involved in widening access and



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I taught a lot of students who articulated then to second and third year of degree programmes, which is a way of attracting people from lower income deprived backgrounds to attend their local college, to get perhaps a higher national certificate within a year and then move on to the second year of a related university programme. Sometimes they stayed on for higher national diplomas and went on to the third year of a university programme. I am a bit more ignorant than I should be. I know a bit more now than I did four years ago, being on the Education Committee, but I am not entirely sure that that is the case in English education, but it is a model that works well and does help widen access.

There is also an interesting programme just now specifically taking 40 students from schools in deprived areas and training them as doctors, with special funds and support. The whole idea of this is that any student who is not from what you might call a normal background, whose background would be that they would normally go to university, needs much more support during their time in universities and that there should be funds to support them to do that. It really does. The support helps them stay, absolutely.

Again, my experience is teaching a lot of mature students, especially women returners. It is what they can give to a programme and what they get from a programme and how the whole economy is helped by the fact that these are now economically productive people with good skills and education and they can get much better jobs than would have been possible. Of course the funding model is entirely different and I take cognisance of that. These ideas and what people here are trying to do are to make life better for people in deprived areas and to allow pupils who might not otherwise get the chance or the ability to go to university and to stay there and achieve. That is what we are all about.

Possibly going to university here is a pretty hard sell for mature students. Would you agree with that?

Chris Skidmore: I definitely agree that there remain barriers, which for some are insurmountable. That needs to be addressed. Some of those barriers are financial. Looking at what we can do, balancing the needs of the Student Loans Company to be able to have packages of support that they feel are robust is something that I am keen to work on. When it comes to postgraduate master's, for example, introducing the master's loan. I have published research last week that showed that the introduction of the master's loan had increased the number of English students taking a master's by 36% in just three years, so there is a huge change.

Maintenance is an issue. I know that Philip Augar's post-18 review has been looking at what maintenance packages of support will be put in place for disadvantaged students. That is definitely one issue.

The other thing I am keen to look at, and you have talked about it with outcomes, is that we have access and we have participation. How do we take participation and look at it in more fine detail? That is where I have



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created what I call the STEP framework, which I want to be able to flesh out, and any work the Committee can do on this would be very valuable. It is the transition, the experience and the progress, so I would say that is the STEP framework. It is that moment where, once you get into university and you arrive on campus, how can you ensure for those groups, whether it is mature women, disabled students, care leavers, or estranged students, what are the barriers that they did not realise were barriers that caused them to drop out?

It is where that dropout rate in certain institutions is unacceptable and we have to be able to work with them to change it, not to bash them on the head, but to turn around and say, "Why are people dropping out?" We do know that half of them are out for financial reasons, so I do not negate that, but it is the other areas around accessible accommodation, ensuring that there are packages of support put in place. Mental health is obviously a large issue, around mental health counselling and what we can do, working with Student Minds, on a mental health charter.

What I am keen to do is pick out groups and say universities do need to be doing more with these various groups, being able to think about what their strategies are going forwards as they transition and then their experience at university. The student experience is integral to making participation work.

Q2119 Marion Fellows: We have heard from University of Warwick. I know that Edinburgh University has run a programme for years called LEAPS, Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools, and they proactively go around schools and encourage pupils to come into the university and see what it is like. It takes the fright out of it before they come. These are good programmes.

In your opinion, Minister, are part-time and mature students crowded out of higher education by full-time undergraduates?

Chris Skidmore: That is a question about overall student numbers and I still feel that we need more students going forwards. We are going to see an increase in the demographics in the number of 18-year-olds coming forwards as we go into the 2020s, so we will need more places. The opportunities for those students who did not consider HE at 18—there are so many career pathways where they need a degree, particularly nursing. You might start off as a nursing associate and then decide. When you are 18, you thought that was your aspiration and then your aspirations and your dreams are raised higher and you need to go back to university to get the degree to become a qualified nurse.

That is where the flexibility needs to come in. That is why the two-year degree programme was put in place so that those who are working could qualify faster and that is where we think we also need to look at models like Australia, which have the modular base, where you can do a module and maybe go off for six months, then come back and do another module. How do you bank those credits, going up towards then finally



completing the degree? The Open University has been an exemplar of this for decades, but why has our system not been able to expand beyond the institution of the OU?

Q2120 Marion Fellows: This is very much tying in with our work on the fourth industrial revolution as well, because people are now always going to have to be learners. Even having a degree does not mean that you know everything and can just maintain your learning at that level. There have to be provisions for people to go back and upskill, retrain or whatever, and probably at university level as well.

There are now a number of institutions known for their flexible and alternative offers. Do universities do enough, in your opinion, to attract part-time and mature students across the board?

Chris Skidmore: Clearly the financing is an issue and universities will tell me that they would like to do more, but looking at maintenance support and packages is something that we do need to look at. I am keen to explore, as the work on the Diamond review and what they have done in Wales continues, and to learn from our devolved colleagues and their systems around funding to see what needs to be done for the future. All I can recognise is that this is something that is not an either/or. We need more graduates and we need more people to retrain, so how can we help to expand that process?

Q2121 Marion Fellows: I suppose if universities are devolved in terms of funding, which they are in this system, it is difficult for them to say, "We will take three part-time students and have the space for three part-timers", which might be the equivalent of one full-time student, and still get the same income with higher expenditure. Are the Government thinking about doing anything to help them do that?

Chris Skidmore: In terms of looking at part-time maintenance loans, we have been able to introduce those, but not around the distance learning. The uptake on the maintenance loans has not been as strong, I think, as we had hoped. I can send recent figures to the Committee. I think we had estimated it would be 15,000 to 19,000.

Matt Toombs: Around 20,000 we estimated, yes.

Chris Skidmore: Yes, and it has been lower than 5,000 at the moment. There are clearly other issues apart from financial packages and support that are preventing students from engaging with part-time learning. I guess that question comes down to what is the relationship between the part-time learner and the institution and how do they engage on their course? When it comes to commuter students in certain areas—Manchester has a strong number of commuter students—how can we help support those, given that they are not having that traditional residential experience that other students are having, but then also they are probably having to compete with other demands, domestic demands, at home as well?



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It will be undoubtedly one of the great challenges that we will need to face, alongside looking at how we can reskill those who are not looking at HE as a route. The Chancellor's national retraining programme as well, the work the Committee will do on this will be something I will welcome and receive.

Q2122 Chair: The figures on part-time students, though, are quite stark in terms of the reductions from the early 2000s. In 2010 there were 243,000 part-time students, and by 2015 that had reduced to 107,000. That is quite stark in terms of the reduction.

You did mention the Open University, Minister, but the Open University is going through a pretty tough time in terms of recruiting students, particularly from England. The numbers of students who are entering on degree-level qualifications with the Open University dropped from 32,000 in 2010, to 22,000 by 2015. Of course that saw the introduction of much higher fees. Some degree-level students doing foundation courses, for instance, at the Open University dropped by almost 90% between the same period, between 2010 and 2015.

The Sutton Trust estimated that the Open University's fees rose by 247% between 2011 and 2012. That has obviously been a barrier to those people who are returning learners or people who, having missed out in their teens, are wanting to do a degree with the Open University as a mature student. Is that not a particular focus of attention for the Department? The Open University was put there for a reason and it has been a very good and successful model over many years, but it is going through some tough times at the moment.

Chris Skidmore: I absolutely acknowledge the decline that has taken place in the number of part-time students, and it is important to put on record that 85% of that decline has been in courses other than first degrees. Looking at issues around other part-time courses, foundation degrees, higher national diplomas and higher national certificates, there was a 38% decline between 2010-11 and 2015-16. Obviously, some of the falls came in with the introduction of the higher tuition fees. The work we have done with the Department has demonstrated that when it comes to whether that has a disproportionate affect on disadvantaged students or not, there is no difference in the actual demographic; it has just affected it across the board.

Looking at this with the OU, obviously the OU are keen to be exploring what maintenance opportunities are there. Obviously the Augar review was established to be able to not just look at HE and FE, but at that pathway from post-18 right the way through. We do not want to prejudge the report, but I think one of the terms of reference was absolutely to grip this nettle.

Q2123 Chair: I think, though, that while Open University entrance might have recovered to some extent, an awful lot of the backfilling has been done by overseas students. Therefore it is not serving the people it was meant



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to serve in the first place in terms of the indigenous population, the people who have missed out on university education in their teens. Therefore while the statistics from the Open University might look like they are improving, I think that does need to have some work done on it to make sure that we are having the Open University serving the population. I am not saying that overseas students are not welcome—I am not saying that at all. However, what I do not want is to see the overseas student statistics hide what is still a problem in terms of the population of this country who are not gaining access to a university course.

Chris Skidmore: Yes. When we have looked at some of the support that we have offered, obviously tuition fee loans are available for part-time courses so long as they are 30 credits a year, and obviously a part-time maintenance loan that has come in from 2019 and 2020 will also be about 30 credits. We are looking at where we can increase the maintenance loan, but there is that 30-credit opportunity to be able to access it, and that in itself is a measure. The question around the post-18 review is something the Secretary of State picked up in a speech in November or December, just after I became Universities Minister, which is around the overall skills base of the population.

We are looking therefore at a large number of people who get up to a level 3 qualification, a large number who get level 6-plus, but then that level 4 and level 5 dip, compared with Germany or the Netherlands, where you have that larger number of people looking at those higher technical degree qualifications. That is something that obviously is critical to upskilling the productivity of the country and how we look at level 4 and level 5.

When it comes to the post-18 review, we have the Augar review, but also work on level 4 and level 5 that will need to be taken forwards. That is around the higher national diplomas, higher national certificates and what we can do to ensure that they are vigorous and that they provide career opportunities at the end of them. I hope that the work of the post-18 review will make sure that we look at that. Obviously, there is an issue around the credits as well, but we have to be able to move to a more flexible system ultimately, to ensure that it works for people.

Q2124 **Chair:** Also within that challenge of the fourth industrial revolution we have to have not just upskilling, but reskilling of people whose current qualifications and current jobs may become surplus to requirements and we will need to change their professional and academic outlook from that perspective. That is a big capacity-building programme that the Government needs to engage in.

Chris Skidmore: Yes, and the financing also for FE routes as well, which has not traditionally been there in the same way it has for degree programmes, finding out what the barriers are for those people who have a level 3 qualification to be able to get to level 4 or level 5. They have not



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been able to access loan finance, so that is something obviously we should be looking at.

Q2125 **James Frith:** Good morning, Minister. Thank you for your answers. I am encouraged by your outlook. Do you think, though, that the Augar review has the scope to be as radical as some of the topics and areas where you have given us answers today? Will he be seen as a new radical in his review or as a tinker man?

Chris Skidmore: I also want to say on record, I enjoyed your interview in the Wonkhe. I read that this morning.

James Frith: Thanks. That is at least two people that have read it then.

Chris Skidmore: I did not disagree with anything you said in that interview.

James Frith: What a flatterer. Thank you.

Lucy Powell: Big tick there.

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to Augar, I must put on record that I do not want to prejudge the report, that it was an independent report, that I have not seen a final version of the report and obviously it will be published in due course. I can give all the lines that I am meant to say on this sort of issue. This was set up as a prime ministerial priority, and the terms of reference were broad enough to be able to look at what we need to do. My worry is that it will just become an HE-focused debate of resetting HE versus FE. There is a lot in there that we need to make sure focuses, going forwards, on the FE debate as well. I hope it is going to be in a radical place.

The teams had an opportunity over the past year to think, "What needs to be done?" We are keen to take the Augar review and the other measures forwards towards the spending review, but there will obviously be that financial element that will need to be covered as well. What are the measures that are in the Augar review that need initial investment? That is also a question that we need to answer. In order to be able to meet the ambitions of whatever changes are made, there is undoubtedly going to be a financial aspect to it as well.

Q2126 **Chair:** Are you holding off on publishing the Augar review so that you can prepare the departmental response to publish on the same day, like the Timpson review?

Chris Skidmore: I might turn to Matt to give the official departmental line on the process, but it has been an independent report all the way through and Philip Augar is welcome to publish whenever he wants to publish.

Q2127 **Chair:** Is it almost ready or is it ready, do you think?



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Matt Toombs: Shall I come in on this? The report is not finalised yet, but it will shortly be complete, and when it is completed it will be published.

Q2128 **Chair:** The final full stop has not been applied, is that what it is?

Matt Toombs: It is being finalised, yes.

Q2129 **James Frith:** Have you seen a draft of it, Minister?

Chris Skidmore: I have not seen a draft.

Q2130 **James Frith:** You have spoken about celebrating in many respects the intervention, and in answer to William's question about picking up the pieces, I think there is an enlightened approach. Therefore, should the impact assessment of whatever Augar recommends be about helping the poorer students or those with the least opportunities? On a chart of impact we can see that the reintroduction of maintenance grants would have the highest impact for poorer students. Do you hope that that will be advocated in Augar?

Chris Skidmore: Yes. I think there are clear issues around the perception of student finance and debt and sustainable living as a student. Sometimes they are conflated and sometimes that can be a generational thing. You will have parents or grandparents of students saying, "This is so much debt to saddle to be able to get a degree", whereas it is clear to me that we do need to be able to finance a degree system that allows for an individual who may benefit from it to be able to pay that back.

The student experience side of things is clearly around the costs of living and the ability to be able, as a student, to live in maybe a strange city. Obviously, we provide now the maximum maintenance that has ever been: £8,944, with an uplift for London. Evidence I receive from students across campuses is that that is still not enough sometimes. That is where I think also looking at subsidiary issues around private rented landlords, and being able to crack down on rogue landlords and some of the legislation that has come through there is equally important. My worry is you increase maintenance and you create a cyclical effect by which then private landlords start looking to raise their prices.

Q2131 **James Frith:** The distinction there would be between grant and loan, would it not?

Chris Skidmore: Yes. Obviously there is a case now, post ONS's decision, around what is being written off and what is not being written off. I hope the review will explore the opportunity for maintenance grants, whether they are for all students or whether they are for the most disadvantaged. I think the more effective route would be to look to be able to target and to demonstrate that that is there for the most disadvantaged.

Q2132 **James Frith:** Do you think that HE needs to do more formal work with



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FE in the sharing of their heritage or assets or links to industry and what might those formal links include?

Chris Skidmore: I have seen this at a local level from a constituency MP near Bristol. I could not agree more that there definitely needs to be a closing of the divide between HE and FE. There are collaborations that take place. What struck me is that around some of the franchising of degrees you will have certain HE institutions that will not allow FE institutions to be able to offer a degree programme because they claim that somehow it is in competition with them. I totally disagree with that approach.

The changing and franchising of degrees that we are bringing in through the OfS—so we are not going to have the Privy Council model anymore—is going to move to a system by which the OfS can allow this. I think that would help students who were in FE colleges to break down this thing where they say, “I am in an FE college; I will never get to university”. If the FE college is offering degrees, they will be able to see—

Q2133 **James Frith:** I would absolutely agree with that. The other way around is slightly different in a David and Goliath model. Do you think that it should be applied the other way around equally or would there be an exception? I am thinking with a real issue in mind, where an FE college faces direct competition from an HE institution that is to provide FE on its doorstep. That would warrant exception, wouldn't it?

Chris Skidmore: I would be interested for certain universities to be exploring taking level 4 and level 5 qualifications and I think there would be scope for being able to do so. If we are looking at a rapid expansion into the number of people taking level 4 and level 5 qualifications—and I do not want to speak out of turn, because I am not the FE Minister—how do we ensure that we can allow the FE sector to cope with that expansion? It might be that it would allow the money to follow the student and that there are the opportunities for HE organisations also to offer level 4 and level 5. But the collaboration that needs to take place is long overdue.

There are examples and we know there are examples. The one that struck me on my tour of the 30 universities I have done so far is at Loughborough, where the student union is both the student union for Loughborough College and Loughborough University. It is things like that where they have thought it through about the student routes and how we could ensure that you are not saying, “That is the college, this is the university”. It should be, “How do you create those pathways between the two so that those students at FE can be thinking about going on to a HE course if they need to?”

Q2134 **James Frith:** Would one Minister responsible for both be a good start?

Chris Skidmore: My shadow number obviously has that responsibility. The Government are looking at post-18 in the round. It would be a huge brief if that was the case. I work very closely with the FE Minister and the



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Department of Education and we have to continue that close collaboration, because there just cannot be an institutional—

Q2135 **James Frith:** You have two desks at the moment though, right? You still straddle two Departments.

Chris Skidmore: Yes. I have never been a fan of saying that a change right at the top of Whitehall is somehow going to absolutely cascade things. It has to be that bottom-up approach as well. It is always, "Let's create a Minister for such and such", or, "Let's do such and such", but it will not necessarily change the problem. There is a case to be made, but at the same time I would not by any means think that any change in ministerial duties would reform the system.

Q2136 **Mr William Wragg:** You touched on the ONS intervention and obviously that intervention occurred partway through the Augar review. While not wanting to entrap you into revealing the report, which you have not seen or know the content of yet, because the goal posts have been moved and it is now an entirely different context in that the student loan book is going to be treated with spending rather than lending, has the scope of the Augar review been adjusted accordingly?

Chris Skidmore: As far as I am aware, the terms and conditions of the review remain the same as when they were announced in spring last year. Obviously one of the specific criteria—I am trying to find the exact quote and Matt might be able to help—is that it must remain—

Matt Toombs: Must remain consistent with the Government's fiscal rules.

Q2137 **Mr William Wragg:** Indeed, but you mentioned in your answer to James that obviously the difference between a grant and a loan is a contextual change. How is that going to be dealt with by the review?

Chris Skidmore: It is not for me to prejudge what the review is going to be able to set out in its conclusions, but I would expect if there are changes that the review has made, it will have to be able to circulate money within the envelope it has been set. Obviously the ONS decision of moving loans across, off the student loan book on to the deficit demonstrates quite clearly that the Government are making a £12.5 billion per year commitment to HE. It has been written off anyway. Whether it is a maintenance loan or a maintenance grant does not make a difference in some cases.

Q2138 **Mr William Wragg:** It does, doesn't it, because they are two different things?

Chris Skidmore: But the very fact that it is a so-called loan versus a so-called grant effectively is—

Q2139 **Mr William Wragg:** When you say something is "so-called", if you changed its name you would not need to call it "so-called", would you?



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Chris Skidmore: That is very true, but that distinction between grant funding and grant financing and loan financing becomes negated.

Mr William Wragg: I understand. I look forward to the review.

Q2140 **Trudy Harrison:** I am a beneficiary of the part-time mature student HE opportunity. At age 35, with four children and a seven-hour commute, I was very grateful that the University of Salford saw past the fact that I had no good GCSEs and no A-levels and took me on and I am very grateful to Copeland Borough Council as my employer. The greatest barrier was me and I managed to overcome that one. Whether it led to a rewarding and successful career, I do sometimes wonder. *[Laughter.]*

Lucy Powell: It did for us.

Trudy Harrison: It was certainly a ladder of opportunity. Our Committee report recognises the value of degree apprenticeships in the UK productivity and the skills gap challenges, but also in that ladder of opportunity. We recommended that some of the funding for the Office for Students should be used to promote degree apprenticeships and also that all higher education should provide degree apprenticeships. Do you agree?

Chris Skidmore: Let me just check what financial support the Office for Students has given to degree apprenticeships. The OfS provided, between November 2016 and November 2018, £8.8 million of funding through the degree apprenticeship development fund, supporting 103 HE providers. I should just put on the record that the OfS is providing some financial support.

On the broader point you make around looking at how we can establish and institutionalise degree apprenticeships, I absolutely agree. We need to do more. I think we started with about 100 degree apprentices in 2012. The numbers have risen. It was 10,000 last year. I think the starts between August and February, because they are done in six-monthly cohorts and there is that flexibility of when you start, are now 14,000. They are rising and it is how you continue that rise. Obviously over 60 out of the 86 degree apprenticeship standards are being established and it is those barriers that we have to look at, the SMEs, because those large companies that are going to be able to offer degree apprenticeships—I have them in my own local area, Rolls-Royce and Airbus—see the value in them and they can create those career programmes, but how do we ensure that the smaller SMEs can see the value in taking on degree apprentices as well?

Q2141 **Trudy Harrison:** Yes, and probably because of my own value around learning while you earn I have taken on a degree apprentice in our parliamentary office in the constituency. Oliver, our apprentice, knew nothing of this opportunity when he was at school and I think that is one of the greatest barriers. While we still see head teachers promoting their school's measure of success in how many students have gone on to Oxbridge or Russell Group universities, I feel that that will still be a



barrier. How can HE work with secondary schools and colleges, recognising that your brief is higher education, to better promote degree apprenticeships when there is a clear business conflict there that they would no doubt prefer a full-time student?

Chris Skidmore: Somewhere in this brief I have material around looking at careers advice and what is being done on that. From an HE perspective and areas that are covering my brief, we are certainly interested in ensuring that when it comes to the Unistats website—there is a review that is ongoing at the moment—we can do more to promote degree apprenticeships and ensure that the value of degree apprenticeships is part of that work.

There is also the open access data competition. We will be creating apps. You can have careers advisers, you can have careers support, but what are students going to use and how can we keep up with the latest technologies, which will be able to be there in real time for them to access so that they have information on degree apprenticeships? We have two winners of this year's competition. A new competition has been launched for this coming year as well. All of this work is cumulatively towards making information available so that students know what those opportunities are, and mainstreaming degree apprenticeships in those opportunities will be key.

Trudy Harrison: I think mainstreaming is key because it is complex. It is quite difficult for an employer, as I am, or a parent, as I also am, to understand the opportunities, particularly for degree apprenticeships compared with the standard UCAS system. We all know how that works. While I appreciate using new technology, I also think the system needs to be simplified so that students, teachers, parents and employers understand what is available. I am pleased to see that there has been a consistent increase, but given that our Committee values the ladder of opportunity we would like to see that continue even more.

Q2142 **Chair:** Adding to that, if you are determined that the degree apprenticeship model is something that is going to be a success, the access to independent and impartial careers advice and guidance is absolutely vital to the success of that. It is not happening universally. It is very much a patchwork quilt around the country in terms of young people's access to that impartial advice and guidance from a careers aspect.

Chris Skidmore: Early signs from the degree apprenticeship development fund that has been established have shown that when it comes to creating these courses, obviously you have the standards and you do need to be able to demonstrate the purpose and the outcomes of degree apprenticeships. I have seen it anecdotally going around and speaking to students, but ensuring that there is ambition as well is going to be key. Yes, I think as this develops you are going to see a system like Manchester Metropolitan, for example, with degree apprentices going through the system and coming back as alumni. There is a lot to catch up



on in comparison with the traditional degree. We will then get degree apprenticeship ambassadors coming back to their universities and hopefully going back into schools as well, making the case for degree apprenticeships.

Q2143 Ben Bradley: I want to go back to touch on what Will was talking about with regards to tuition fees. I personally do not see them as the huge barrier that some people put them across as. I think maintenance and being able to support yourself at university is more of a challenge, but does that matter if nobody else knows and people do not understand the system?

Chris Skidmore: I met Martin Lewis, who has strong views obviously on the ability to communicate the system. Obviously the system as it exists is defined through legislation, which creates the narrative by which the Secretary of State has the power to make loans. Matt, correct me here if I misspeak. That is one of the issues around how you describe and define a loan system that means you are not paying anything back until you are earning £25,725. Even then, once you are earning £27,000, you are only paying back £15 a month.

It is important that we communicate better and I am interested in the work that Martin Lewis and the Russell Group universities have done around where the money is being spent, because you do get this narrative of saying this is so much debt that you are taking on and, "I must pay it back as soon as I can". That is the last thing you want to do. This is in fact a great financial package where you are going to get the best rates.

Q2144 James Frith: It would be an interesting strapline for the loan company.

Chris Skidmore: It is something that we have to be able to be better at communicating, but the review may come up with a different model of how student financing works. I do not want to prejudge what happens with that. I just think it is also important to say that regardless of the costs of a degree at £9,250, it still costs about £11,000 to put on a degree across all sectors.

Q2145 Ben Bradley: This is the concern, certainly in terms of the loan system. Although it should not be a financial barrier to anybody, it is certainly a mental barrier for particularly communities like mine, where the average income is not high and where this discussion around loans and debt is a sensitive one, particularly when parents have not gone to university and have not experienced that themselves. That is a huge challenge to overcome.

The concern I suppose with the Augar review is precisely that, that the review could recommend changing tuition fees. It is not something I think would be particularly helpful, but if it does, have the Treasury bought into that? If it comes back and says that we need to reduce tuition fees as a headline-grabbing statement, is the Chancellor going to fill that gap?



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Chris Skidmore: I cannot comment on behalf of the Chancellor of the Treasury, unfortunately. The review obviously does report to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education. Those discussions will be ongoing when the report is published about what the Government response will be.

Q2146 **James Frith:** The argument, if I may, Chair and Ben, is that currently in the system there is a sunk cost to the Treasury already. The argument is about whether you put that sunk cost at the end or at the beginning. The beginning, vis-à-vis maintenance loans or possibly a reduction of fees, is where the argument is at. I would say that Augar may well conclude that rather than the apparent argument—I am not saying you are saying this—of, “Do not worry, you will not have to pay it back because you will not earn enough or until you earn enough”, this is about where the Treasury funds its contribution, which is currently in the form of sunk cost or unreceived loan repayment. You put that at the front and you encourage more through the system. That is where I hope it will go.

It was also Labour party policy in 2010. I think Ed Miliband announced it at the conference in 2010. I do not believe—Matthew, perhaps you can comment—that would be inconsistent with the current Government’s own fiscal rules, would it?

Matt Toombs: You are right that the ONS change means that the accounting in the deficit for the write-off on student loans will be upfront rather than after 30 years, which had been the basis before the ONS made the change. The level of write-off on loans that are issued each year will then get recognised in the deficit in the same way as grant funding is recognised in the deficit at the year that it is paid out.

Chair: Ben, anything to add? No. In that case, Minister, your ordeal is over.

Chris Skidmore: Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for coming along this morning. It has been a real pleasure. Thanks for coming along, Matthew.

Matt Toombs: Thank you for the discussion.

Chair: That concludes our deliberations for this morning. Thank you very much indeed.