

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Universities and Higher Education, HC 1213

Tuesday 22 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 22 March 2022.

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Apsana Begum; Miriam Cates; Anna Firth; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns.

Questions 1-97

Witnesses

I: Nicola Dandridge CBE, Chief Executive, Office for Students, Professor Debra Humphris, Chair, University Alliance, Clare Marchant, Chief Executive, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and Quintin McKellar CBE, Vice President, Universities UK.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nicola Dandridge, Professor Debra Humphris, Clare Marchant and Quintin McKellar.

Chair: Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for coming. Just before I begin and ask the panel to introduce themselves, I wanted to point out that the National Union of Students was invited to appear before our Committee this morning because we rightly wanted to include the voices of students on universities and higher education. I have to say that the NUS have shown great reluctance to appear before us today. We first contacted them more than three weeks ago, inviting them to appear, and got very little response. It took six emails and seven phone calls before the NUS finally agreed to send a representative, and then we were told yesterday at 4.30 pm that the NUS could no longer attend, because their representative was unwell. We asked for a replacement and that was refused.

It is disappointing that the NUS have responded in this way and given the appearance that they are not willing to appear before our Committee. We will call them in for a separate session. They should be accountable to Parliament. The Committee is aware that students are facing multiple issues at present and the NUS has been vocal on this front. There are also some recent controversies on antisemitism involving the National Union of Students and it would have been good to question them on that. I genuinely find it incomprehensible that one of the key bodies responsible for representing the voices of students was, in essence, unwilling to come and talk to this Committee about the important issues facing students in higher education and it is sad that the voice of students will be missing from today's discussion.

Can the panel introduce themselves and their titles for the benefit of those watching on Parliament TV?

Clare Marchant: Morning. I am Clare Marchant, chief executive at UCAS.

Quintin McKellar: Hello. I am Quintin McKellar from the University of Hertfordshire.

Chair: I should declare that I know Quintin quite well, and many of my constituents go to your university. It is a pleasure to have you here today.

Professor Humphris: I am Debra Humphris, vice-chancellor of the University of Brighton and chair of the University Alliance.

Nicola Dandridge: I am Nicola Dandridge, chief executive of the Office for Students.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you. I will direct my first two questions predominantly to the Office for Students. The Campaign Against Antisemitism and King's College London published a survey of the British public's views towards Jews and a poll of the Jewish community. The study found that 92%

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

thought antisemitism in universities was a problem and 84% said it is a very big problem. What is the Office for Students doing to not just combat antisemitism at universities but require universities to adopt the international definition of antisemitism?

Nicola Dandridge: In terms of what we are doing to combat antisemitism more broadly, we have very strong and productive relationships with the Union of Jewish Students and other representative groups, such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, for example. We have focused quite a lot of our work on a statement of expectations that is designed to prevent and then address harassment, including antisemitic harassment. We published that last year, setting out very clearly what we expect registered providers, universities and colleges to do. We will be evaluating the impact, including looking at the impact on Jewish students.

Q2 **Chair:** The reason I ask that is that you are the regulator for universities, yet in the case of David Miller, who after a long time was removed by Bristol University, there was very little evidence of you taking any action or intervening. The only reason anything happened was that academics, parliamentarians, the Jewish community and charities raised concerns with Bristol University. What action does the OfS intend to take when academics or institutions breach the IHRA definition of antisemitism?

Nicola Dandridge: Moving on to the IHRA definition, we have again worked with Jewish groups to work out how best to document who has signed up and who hasn't. We have been very public in communicating which universities and colleges have signed up to the IHRA definition and which haven't. We are in the process of reviewing that in the context of our statement of expectations.

Q3 **Chair:** What are you going to do to intervene as a regulator, in a nutshell?

Nicola Dandridge: If universities don't sign up?

Chair: If there are cases like the David Miller case at Bristol University.

Nicola Dandridge: We have powers and responsibilities in relation to a variety of regulatory conditions, including free speech, but we are not the enforcer of equality principles. I think we would expect universities to make sure that they are taking steps to promote free speech, comply with their—

Q4 **Chair:** Surely as a regulator you want Jewish people to feel that universities are a safe place?

Nicola Dandridge: Absolutely, and we are channelling our energies through the statement of expectations to prevent and tackle harassment. That is exactly why we are doing it.

Q5 **Chair:** I am still not clear exactly what you are doing in substance. What are you doing to deal with this problem?

Nicola Dandridge: We have channelled it through these expectations, to prevent and address harassment against students, including Jewish students. We have also published a large number of resources on our

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

website where we identify good practice in dealing with antisemitism. We are documenting the numbers of universities and colleges who have signed up to the IHRA definition. We will carry on working in this area.

- Q6 **Chair:** You will have seen the reports by LBC and Theo Usherwood, possibly, about the rapper Lowkey. He was announced to be opening the session of the NUS conference at the end of this month. He has made a number of antisemitic comments. I will quote one of them: "The mainstream media has weaponised the Jewish heritage of Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, to try and stave off these genuine inquiries into the nature of the groups fighting in Ukraine". He also supported David Miller, who we discussed before. What assessment do you make of the response by the National Union of Students, who said in part of their statement, "While we welcome genuine political debate, we have been sad to see the use of harassment and misinformation against Lowkey. We condemn these tactics used against anybody"?

Nicola Dandridge: We do not regulate the National Union of Students.

- Q7 **Chair:** Yes, but clearly this is an issue affecting universities and students. Would you not be interested in it?

Nicola Dandridge: If it has an impact on university students.

Chair: Well it does have an impact on university students, because it is very threatening to Jewish students.

Nicola Dandridge: We have not received any notifications of that.

- Q8 **Chair:** So you would not have a discussion—a dialogue—with the National Union of Students when there are big issues like this?

Nicola Dandridge: I only read about this yesterday, so I haven't had a chance to talk about it with colleagues yet; it is just too soon.

- Q9 **Chair:** Would that be something you would do? Surely you would want to know what on earth was going on.

Nicola Dandridge: When I read it, I thought I do need to know what is going on, but as I said, I only read it yesterday, so it is extremely recent.

- Q10 **Chair:** What more can be done by the OfS to prevent that type of behaviour from occurring again and to make sure that we do not have this upsurge of antisemitic incidents at universities?

Nicola Dandridge: I think we need to carry on working very closely with Jewish groups to identify what they would find most helpful, particularly the Union of Jewish Students. Personally, what I think we are doing at the OfS is prioritising making our statement of expectations work. We will be reviewing how effective that is at the end of this year, with a view to seeing whether we need to take further regulatory action if it is not successful, but I hope it will have an impact. The most useful thing we can do is focus on that intervention, which is quite significant.

- Q11 **Chair:** I do not know if Quintin or Professor Humphris would like to make

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

a final comment, given that you represent so many universities? Quintin, you go first.

Quintin McKellar: First, it is important to say that Universities UK is categorically against discrimination of any type. Most universities have policies that actually exceed the requirements of the IHRA, both in terms of breadth and depth—in fact, including things like positive actions. I think some universities have had a concern about the imposition of the IHRA within their own policies. But, Jewish staff and students have got specific issues; at my university we have established a group specifically to support and help our Jewish staff and students.

Harassment against ethnic minorities does happen; it is abhorrent. UUK have reviewed and brought out recommendations, which universities are now signed up to, regarding discrimination and harassment. That is a positive move, but we want to try and eliminate discrimination of all kinds.

Professor Humphris: Certainly across the Universities Alliance, there is increasingly an incredibly diverse range of staff and students across the universities, and equality, diversity and inclusion are taken seriously at every single one of them. To use the example of the power of the OfS lever the statement of expectations on harassment might sound quite thin, but there is a huge amount in that. Certainly at my university, as a consequence of that, we have a whole campaign—a whole infrastructure—called #neverok for staff and student disclosures. We have never had the data, but we are now getting it so that we can investigate. I welcome the OfS expectations.

Q12 **Chair:** One final thing on this. I do think the OfS is sleepy on this issue and should be much more proactive intervening, given that antisemitism is a growing problem in our universities. I just think the OfS has priorities on other issues and does not treat this in the way that it should.

Nicola Dandridge: I do not accept that we do not think this is a serious issue. We do, and we are dealing with it in a targeted, thoughtful and sustainable way.

Q13 **Chair:** It is certainly below the radar. As I have said, there was hardly any involvement at all with you and Bristol University—as far as I am aware—given what happened with David Miller.

Nicola Dandridge: We have been in touch with the University of Bristol, but I cannot talk about individual cases.

Chair: My colleagues want to ask some questions on freedom of speech at universities. I am going to start with Tom.

Q14 **Tom Hunt:** I think that myself and a large number of colleagues were shocked by a recent decision by the University of Nottingham to strip Tony Sewell of his honorary degree. We were shocked—really shocked—and concerned about what that decision says about the extent to which some of our leading universities truly respect free speech and different thoughts. I think it makes a nonsense of the claim that the free speech Bill is not needed; quite clearly, it is needed—and that is evidence of it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Do you think the free speech Bill goes far enough towards ensuring that those kinds of decisions do not happen?

Nicola Dandridge: We have been very clear that we think that the Bill is needed, and that there is a serious, evidenced issue about the lack of free speech in universities. We will be working with Government as the Bill progresses and gets implemented. It will create considerable and significant new powers that will enable the Office for Students to tackle issues of free speech more effectively than our powers allow at the moment.

Q15 **Tom Hunt:** Issues such as cancelling people like Tony Sewell, who just promote a world view that might differ slightly from the world view of many students but is within the parameters of legitimate debate?

Nicola Dandridge: The Bill, if implemented, will give us significant new powers to require universities to promote and protect free speech explicitly. At the moment, we have powers, but they are indirect. What the Bill does is give very direct powers, so we would be able to challenge situations such as that.

Tom Hunt: The final thing I will say is this. There are a lot of these debates that kick off from time to time in the media, but I must just stress the extent and the large number of colleagues who were appalled by that decision by the University of Nottingham. A letter signed by about 60 MPs will be going to the University of Nottingham. We will not let it lie.

Chair: I find it astonishing that some people who have allegedly made controversial statements regarding China and the genocide of the Uyghurs, for example, have had honorary degrees at that university, yet Tony Sewell is refused—or his honorary doctorate is withdrawn. I think it's pretty bad.

Q16 **Miriam Cates:** I just want to come in on that. Some recent research published by the Legatum Institute in January on academic freedoms showed that 41% of academics on campus feel the need to self-censor, and suggested that 16% of academics disagree that limits on freedom of speech undermine the core principles on which universities are founded. I think there have been moves in recent years to prioritise people—particularly students and young people—feeling safe from feelings of offence and having their views challenged, over freedom of speech. Is that something you recognise? Are you concerned about it? And how can universities be proactive in growing a culture where people do feel confident to come across views that they disagree with? Who shall I start with? Clare.

Clare Marchant: UCAS is more concerned with the 750,000 students who progress from school and college to university. It's that transition that we are really interested in: how much are we creating an inclusive environment as they arrive at university?

We recently did, and we are trying to do, deep insights work on different communities. The recent publication was on LGBTQ+ students and how

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they feel and the support that they need. We have one coming up later in the spring about disabled students. I think our role as a charity is to say, "What does that experience feel like?", in talking to those 750,000 students, and to say, "What can both schools and colleges and universities do to help with that transition?" That is how I see UCAS's role in the preparatory piece as you go into the first year—in the context of inclusive environments, which help with freedom of speech.

Q17 **Miriam Cates:** Just to push back on that slightly, do you not think that the emphasis on protecting people's feelings is actually leading to this belief that it's wrong to make people feel uncomfortable intellectually? Actually, feeling uncomfortable intellectually is the driving force for academic creativity. Isn't almost cushioning the feelings of students leading to the problem?

Clare Marchant: In actual fact, in some of our recent insights work, that is not what students are saying. It's not about, "Be careful with my feelings." It's about, "Put me in touch with networks. Tell me what support is available." It's not, "Be careful with my feelings." That is what we are hearing from different groups of students. It will depend on which group of students we are speaking to, but that is what they are saying. And actually there is some really encouraging data from the schools and colleges end of things to say that students are feeling more able to speak up, be challenged and have challenging debates. I think that's actually quite encouraging for the secondary education side of things.

Miriam Cates: Brilliant—thank you. Quintin, do you want to come in on that?

Quintin McKellar: I think most universities would go to the ends of the earth to maintain freedom of speech, but you are right, and I think we all are concerned about cancel culture. I think we are all concerned about the issues that are suppressing freedom of speech. But let me just give you an example as to why this is so difficult—the issues around pro-Russian propaganda being put forward by colleagues in some universities. I should say that it is probably two colleagues out of 430,000 colleagues; nevertheless, it is still an issue. Should we uphold free speech in that circumstance? These are not simple issues. It's a question of trying to get our heads around the freedom of speech Bill and how it is going to impact on the Prevent legislation, the equalities Acts, employment law and so on, and trying to make sure that it is actually done in a proportionate and sensible way. But I think I would speak for the whole sector in saying that we are absolutely behind freedom of speech.

Miriam Cates: Thank you. Debra, do you have anything to add?

Professor Humphris: I think the issue goes to the heart of the question that you raised, which is about creating a meaningful culture in which we have academic challenge of views and positions and an environment for the transition of students into university, and ensuring we put that in place and that that is supported. Nobody has a right not to be offended. For people to be able to learn from that and understand differing perspectives

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

is an incredibly important part of the transition to our institutions for students coming from schools or colleges or for adults coming in. We have to have a healthy, challenging culture; that's where curiosity and intellectual drive come from.

Miriam Cates: Nicola, do you have anything to add?

Nicola Dandridge: I largely agree with colleagues here. Clearly, free speech is fundamental to the success of higher education in this country. I share your concern about self-censorship; I think the evidence is very compelling on that. That is precisely why I think the free speech Bill is important, because it tackles that. It legitimises people saying, "We have a problem, and this is it." We welcome the Bill and think it is designed precisely to tackle some of the things you have identified.

Chair: I am going to bring in Kim, and then Caroline.

Q18 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I think it is a real shame that the National Union of Students is not here today; I am sure it has a good reason. It would be really useful to hear what it has to say about free speech, so it's a shame it is not here to defend itself this morning. The UCU has said that the Bill is a draconian state intervention in public life, threatening freedom of speech, academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of universities. Nicola, how would you respond to that statement from UCU?

Nicola Dandridge: Look, none of us want that. It would be wholly regrettable if it ended up in that situation, and I do not see why it should. If the Bill is enacted, we, as the regulator, will take responsibility for overseeing a large part of it. We have to have regard to the importance of institutional autonomy; we have to be proportionate and risk-based. The picture that is being painted is just not realistic or likely. If we did start going down that route, we would be in front of the Education Committee to answer questions. So I do not recognise it and I do not think it is realistic. I think that the challenges the Bill is designed to address are serious, and the Bill is a serious way of responding to them.

Professor Humphris: I do not see it as a threat to institutional autonomy. It is a product of democracy—it is a Bill going through the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It will, I assume, come into law; then, the real challenge is how we implement and observe it and protect freedom of speech.

Quintin McKellar: I simply do not recognise that series of statements.

Clare Marchant: Although the NUS is not here today, I think there is a way to get the student voice into some of this as well, as the Bill goes through, by recognising those students we speak to on a day in, day out basis—the 750,000 each and every year, and those in their second, third and fourth year at institutions. There is a way to make their voice heard as this goes through.

Q19 **Kim Johnson:** And do we know whether getting those student voices

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

heard is happening already, Clare?

Clare Marchant: We survey students on a regular basis through about a two-year period. There is every opportunity to use those capabilities to ask them for their views on that. It is not currently something that we focus on. As I said, we are doing insight reports at the moment on cohorts of students; the next cohort that we are looking at is disabled students. However, we are more than happy to help.

Q20 **Dr Johnson:** Like the Chair and most of the Committee, I am sad that the NUS has not been able to come today. However, I have the voices of some of my constituent students, and of their grandparents and parents, to bring forward today. One of them is with regard to what we have just been talking about—self-censorship and concerns on free speech. From talking to a Newcastle politics student, there appears to be a feeling that, if one writes an essay from a particular political perspective—particularly a more right than left political perspective—that may affect the marking and grades that they get for their essay. What options would a student have if they thought that that was happening? Who would they go to if they were concerned about that? Given that it may be a feature of the university department they are in, there may be no one in the department who they can go to. How do we ensure that people's work is not marked by their views?

Professor Humphris: Obviously, I cannot speak for the University of Newcastle, but there will be arrangements for a student who feels that. Obviously, there is the course leader, but if you look at the course leader and think that that is the seat of the challenge, there will be your personal tutor and—certainly in my institution—an arrangement for student support and guidance tutors. There will be other routes through which a student could seek to raise that issue, and we would then address it through the school and course leadership teams, because that should not be the case.

Q21 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** It should not, I agree. Is there any way that they can do that without identifying themselves, or in a way that is external to the university? There is an awareness—or maybe a fear—that their marks will get worse if they complain.

Professor Humphris: I will take you back to the comment I made earlier about responding to the expectations that the OfS has set out. Certainly, at the University of Brighton, we have set up #neverok. There is a whole set of routes by which a student can disclose. They can name themselves; they can do it anonymously. They can just raise an issue—we take it all seriously. In every university, there should be mechanisms through which a student can disclose and identify the extent to which they want support, help and intervention on a range of issues, be it that they think they are being marked unfairly, or that they have a challenging relationship with a member of staff. Every university should have those sorts of arrangements in place.

Quintin McKellar: Of course, we rely on our academic colleagues and their integrity to ensure that this does not happen, but of course, we also have boards of examiners, which are not comprised of individuals, and we

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

have external input to those boards of examiners, which gives us a sort of external overview. I think there are safeguards in place. Debra has pointed out what a student might do if they felt concerned about that.

Most universities mark anonymously now, so the student's identity can and should remain anonymous. Of course, it has to be disclosed if you get to a point where you are investigating a particular issue in a particular case.

Nicola Dandridge: Perhaps I can just add to that. We have a notification system for when students are concerned about practices within their universities. That can be anonymised, and it often is. If that sort of thing was occurring, we would encourage them to let us know, and we can look into exactly those sorts of examples on an anonymous basis.

Dr Caroline Johnson: That is helpful; thank you.

Q22 **Chair:** On outcomes, the headline figure is that more disadvantaged pupils are going to university than ever before, but beneath that, we know that the number of part-time students has dropped enormously; and we know that disadvantaged pupils are less likely to go to the most successful universities, and they are much more likely to drop out and have poor employment outcomes, with some notable exceptions. What are you all doing to address that and to ensure a level playing field for disadvantaged students when they enter higher education? Let's start with you, Clare.

Clare Marchant: You are right that, using traditional measures such as POLAR quintiles, there have been signs of progress in terms of the most disadvantaged going to university. But when you use a basket of measures beyond postcode, which are perhaps more meaningful, that gap between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged is perhaps not narrowing as fast as we would all like.

From our evidence base, we see two particular things that make a difference in the most disadvantaged students aspiring high—both to go to university and to go to some of those more high-tariff institutions. One is personalisation of information, advice and guidance, and the timeliness of that. Far too often, that is happening at age 16, age 17, age 18. Actually, decisions about GCSEs and equivalent are made much earlier than that—age 11, age 12, age 13—so getting into schools and talking about careers options and how GCSE choices can narrow down those options at quite an early age is really important. UCAS's role in that is to make sure that, through digital means, teachers and advisors have access to those as part of lesson plans to make sure they get some of those options in there—things like the careers quiz that we launched in September. Some 500,000 students have already accessed that, and it is only six months old, so there is something about personalisation of that information, advice and guidance and real timeliness of it for disadvantaged students.

For me, the second thing would be really understanding what those careers are from what I call a "near to peer". A teacher or an advisor

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

telling a disadvantaged student is all very well, but they need to hear it from somebody who is close in age to them. Those sorts of services have a real impact, particularly if you provide them through channels where perhaps other channels do not reach those disadvantaged students, such as the use of social media to access some of those near to peers, to hear from someone studying law in x university what that really feels like. That would be my real point: let's put an emphasis on information, advice and guidance to tackle this issue.

Q23 **Chair:** Could the other three be as concise as they can? Quintin?

Quintin McKellar: Of course, disadvantaged students often enter universities with a legacy of poorer previous education, which starts them off at a disadvantage. Often, disadvantaged students have to do part-time work and so on; often, they are commuting students, and many of them do not have the same social capital as more advantaged students. A whole raft of things are affecting it, but we all now have within our universities what historically were called access and participation plans that are designed for us. We have created them ourselves to specifically support those students and try to ensure that they do graduate with the equivalent qualifications.

Of course, that has worked incredibly well for some cohorts, but not all. If you look at the BAME attainment gap, that has closed significantly. It is still appalling—I am not suggesting for a minute that we have succeeded completely—but we are working incredibly hard to try and do exactly what you have described, and try and ensure that disadvantaged students get the same opportunity and graduate with the same outcomes.

Professor Humphris: There are really fundamental things, such as scholarships and support for disadvantaged students from a range of backgrounds. For some of my students, £500 would make an extraordinary difference to their year in terms of allowing them to focus on their studies. There are also interventions relating to employability and careers, starting really early; across the Alliance, students get work-related experience, because this is about getting them through and getting a good job and progressing on. There is peer-to-peer mentoring and a whole set of mentoring schemes.

This week in my university, we have launched our second "just give" week, and the entire focus is on our student potential fund so that we can support more students who are disadvantaged. As I say, that £500 would make a difference. If anybody wants to contribute, please feel free—I am sure you have your own universities—because we are all operating within an increasingly constrained unit of resource.

Nicola Dandridge: Access and participation and tackling disadvantage is one of our core strategic priorities. Quintin has already mentioned the access and participation plans, which we require all universities that charge the higher fee to develop and agree with us. They are quite far-reaching, and are designed to tackle exactly the points you have identified.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Consideration of impact on disadvantaged students is embedded in all aspects of our regulation. For example, when we are looking at quality or student outcomes, we will disaggregate to see how a registered provider is performing in relation to the different categories of student. If, for example, continuation or progression into graduate outcomes is disproportionately and inappropriately low for disadvantaged groups, that can be a breach of a regulatory condition. We distribute over £300 million in student premium, designed to be available for universities and colleges to use to support disadvantaged students. We fund and support Uni Connect, which is a model that facilitates engagement between universities and schools. We have the new director for fair access and participation—I could carry on.

Q24 **Chair:** All these measures may be good or not, but the problem is not getting better, so I question whether all this is working.

Nicola Dandridge: The pandemic has not helped. We know it has particularly impacted on disadvantaged students.

Chair: Even before the pandemic, there were loads of statistics to show—

Nicola Dandridge: But participation by disadvantaged students is creeping up in absolute terms.

Q25 **Chair:** As I said, they are not going to the most successful universities, they are more likely to drop out and they are not getting great employment outcomes.

Nicola Dandridge: That is exactly what our regulation is designed to tackle; that is precisely what we are dealing with.

Chair: I am going to bring in Apsana, then Tom, then Miriam and then Anna.

Q26 **Apsana Begum:** Good morning, panel.

I want to get an understanding of your views on what Liberty, the human rights group, has previously said. It has argued that the single biggest threat to free speech on campus comes from Prevent and the impact that the policing of mainstream discussion on topics such as British foreign policy has, particularly on Muslim students.

Do you feel that the independent review of Prevent, currently under way, is not actually independent—or that its independence can be brought into question, given who has been appointed to deliver that piece of work?

Nicola Dandridge: We have responsibilities in relation to Prevent, as you will be aware. We are acutely conscious of the balance between free speech and Prevent, as a result of which we have carried out various surveys that look at that tension. I think we are very sensitive to the issues that you have identified. Prevent is really important, but so is free speech and ensuring that Muslim students are protected and supported. All that is in the mix.

Q27 **Apsana Begum:** What has the organisation done to protect the Muslim

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

students? I am not clear about that.

Nicola Dandridge: In relation to Prevent in particular?

Apsana Begum: Yes.

Nicola Dandridge: We have done a number of things. We speak with Muslim student groups to establish what the impact is. We monitor Prevent in a way that ensures that it does not, so far as we can, have that impact. We have structured our Prevent responsibilities specifically to ensure that it does not disadvantage particular groups.

Q28 **Apsana Begum:** I am very interested to know which Muslim student groups you are in touch with.

Nicola Dandridge: We are in touch with Tell MAMA.

Apsana Begum: That is not a student group, is it?

Nicola Dandridge: It is not a student group, but it is very involved in this. We have also had meetings with FOSIS.

Chair: Tom, then Miriam and then Anna. Sorry, you have been waiting patiently.

Q29 **Tom Hunt:** I am very interested in the topic of universities' role in careers guidance; I had a very productive discussion with the University of Suffolk on Friday about it. It is really good to hear, for example, that one of its directors involved in this is also a chair of governors at Chantry Academy—a school in one of the most deprived parts of Ipswich. That is a really good example of local universities playing a really positive role in getting involved in young people's lives early on and pointing out the different pathways for them.

I know that there are many great examples of different universities linking up with local employers, getting involved in great education and pointing out to young people opportunities that there could be locally. Do you feel that this is always done enough, though? To what extent should the role of universities be to be an active participant in looking to improve the local environment—in terms of the economic impacts and also linking young people to actual opportunities?

Sometimes the universities have been accused of a "bums on seats" attitude, which seems to be driven more by profit than by playing an active role in looking to improve an area and the life chances of young people within it.

Chair: Can I ask you to answer very briefly?

Professor Humphris: Yes. Tom, absolutely—careers and employability are about getting our students across all the UA universities through and ready for the world of work that they are interested in, about opening up opportunities and about working really strongly with employers.

At Brighton, we have the University of Brighton Academies Trust working into those schools to make sure that we open up aspiration for children at

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

a young age; we know that primary is the key point at which people rule in or rule out what young people can do. Research and knowledge exchange is a really important part of that—how we translate research and work with local employers.

Q30 **Miriam Cates:** I want to move on to the value for money aspect of higher education for the taxpayer and students. Obviously, there has been an enormous expansion of higher education over recent decades; I think the taxpayer now spends about £12 billion a year on higher education. I think 77% of students currently do not ever fully repay their loans, although I understand that the recent changes may affect that.

Clearly, there are benefits to individual students in having the opportunity to go to university, but what are the benefits to society and the taxpayer of the huge expansion in higher education? Do you think that it has improved social mobility or had a negative effect?

Professor Humphris: I never went to university as an undergraduate. I am gazillions of years old, and I trained as a nurse and came through. I would have relished the opportunity to go to university as an undergraduate. I work with students all the time and see the impact it is having on them and their life chances.

The thing I always find surprising is that I still meet plenty of students who are the first people in their family to go to university, so that tells me we still have a way to go. If I think about the workforce and the economy, we need a knowledge economy. We need an educated workforce.

Q31 **Miriam Cates:** If I could slightly push back on that though, 30% of graduates are not in a graduate job five years post-graduation, which suggests to me that we have reached the limit of the knowledge economy in terms of the number of graduates needed in the workforce. Do you recognise that?

Professor Humphris: It is interesting that we only reclassify the occupational jobs every 10 years. The sorts of things people are doing now in graduate jobs in, say, digital, IT and creative industries, did not exist 10 years ago. We really need to think about what is a graduate job in this day and age.

People start and they progress. People take time—five or 10 years. I was talking to one of our graduates the other day at graduation. His sister had just graduated, and his younger brother is currently a student with us. He was working for an NGO supporting refugees. That is not necessarily classified as a graduate job, but he is doing work of extraordinary value.

Q32 **Miriam Cates:** Absolutely, but I suppose the pushback to that is: why do you need a degree, with the debt that comes with it and the cost to the taxpayer, to do that job? It is a brilliantly worthwhile job that absolutely should be done and should be celebrated, but what do you learn at university—other than the academic discipline, which probably is not relevant in that circumstance—that you could not learn in the workplace or straight from school?

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Humphris: There is a fundamental issue about how we characterise "value" in this debate.

Q33 **Miriam Cates:** Would you like to expand on that?

Professor Humphris: Do we see higher education in this country as a cost or as a fundamental investment in our future?

Q34 **Miriam Cates:** That is what I am asking, I suppose. What is the value to society? I do not mean just financially, but in terms of social mobility, our overall competitiveness in the world, or any of those things. What is the value not of the higher education sector itself, but of the massive expansion of that sector? Sorry, I should move on to someone else, but I am really interested in what you have to say.

Professor Humphris: You should get yourself a soapbox, clearly. As I say, I work with students and I see the transformation in their lives. From the research evidence, we know that higher education improves life chances and health and wellbeing in the long term. I have not actually met any students at my university who just ticked it and did it accidentally; they come with a plan. We are about professional, technical and vocational pathways, as are all those in the University Alliance, so most of the students I know have come to do a thing.

Q35 **Miriam Cates:** Can we move on to you, Quintin?

Quintin McKellar: I hope you will excuse me for saying this, but the price of a degree for a student—£9,000 in 2012—will be worth £6,500 in 2024 at the end of the price freeze we are currently experiencing. This year, we have seen a record number of students succeeding—that is, graduating. There has been a reduction in non-continuation—students not progressing through university—so there are all sorts of what I would call value-for-money issues that are positive.

On your point of value to society in terms of social mobility, absolutely. In terms of higher productivity, we know that there is higher productivity from graduates than from non-graduates. They volunteer more. They are healthier. There is a whole raft of things that graduation brings to society, and it would be appalling if it did not.

Clare Marchant: Taking a student perspective on your question, we know that 99% of students progress to higher education because of enjoyment of the subject—that is really important to them—but we also know that employment is always in the top three. They are always looking at employment, and for 50% of them over the course of the pandemic it has been more important than it was previously.

The big thing for us at UCAS and for the sector as a whole is choice, and making choice really clear. Someone should be able to see a traditional three-year undergraduate degree, along with a degree apprenticeship, along with job opportunities, and be able to look at all that and then make a very informed choice, whether they are driven by enjoyment or graduate outcomes. I think if we drive it from there—that open, transparent choice that students are looking to—that will benefit society more. I think

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

students are quite savvy, actually. When we survey them and we speak to them, they know what they are talking about when they are looking at employment outcomes.

- Q36 **Miriam Cates:** But interestingly, 44% of students now say that they do not think their degree was good value for money. That is a big percentage.

Clare Marchant: And over 50% of the 750,000 students who come to us are expressing an interest in degree apprenticeships, so there is definitely a sea change in terms of them looking for some different choices there. Universities—Quintin’s is a good example—are offering those degree apprenticeships. Some are very mature in their offering; some are less mature in their offering at the moment.

Chair: We are going to come on to those a bit later, although I did think that reading your article on degree apprenticeships in *The Times* was like listening to a wonderful piece of music. I describe “degree apprenticeships” as my two favourite words in the English language, and I thought that to have the head of UCAS saying that was incredibly important and really groundbreaking. We will come on to that.

- Q37 **Anna Firth:** I would like to follow up on the issue of students and their perception. It is very unfortunate that we do not have the voice of students formally represented on the panel.

It is lovely to hear that you consider a university education to be of such value, but it is hugely concerning that, as we have just heard, 44% of students in the 2021 student academic experience survey considered their course to be poor or very poor value for money. That is very much the message that I have received, having talked to a number of students at different universities and their parents.

We all know that the university experience has been very degraded in the last couple of years, but those concerns are around the lack of return to face-to-face teaching, which we will come to later; the number of days that have been lost even this year due to strike action; the poor level of mental health support at universities; the high cost of tuition; and the lack of consistent refunds given the experience that has been delivered.

Do you recognise those factors? Do you recognise that students and parents consider that they have received very poor value for money? What do you think needs to be done to deliver better value for money for students? Following on from that, what needs to be done to try to correct students’ perception that this is very poor value for money? There is a lot to unpack there, and we will carry on with some of it later in the session, but I would like to hear your headline thoughts on all those points. Perhaps we will start with Nicola.

Nicola Dandridge: Yes, I do recognise that account, and the surveys showing that students think that they are receiving poor value for money need to be taken incredibly seriously. Clearly, the pandemic has had a huge impact on that, but the figures were low before the pandemic anyway. I will not talk about face-to-face learning, because I appreciate



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that you are going to come back to that, but just as access and participation is one of our four strategic priorities, so is value for money. One of the things we have to do is turn those figures around.

When we were first set up, we did a survey, working with student unions, to better understand what students meant by value for money. Overwhelmingly, the quality of the teaching came out really strongly, as did graduate outcomes; just as Debra said, so many students go to university to get a job. That is reflected in the way that we regulate. We have just published a new set of regulatory conditions, which really drill down into the quality of teaching and the support that is provided for students. We are looking separately at graduate outcomes as a way of regulating.

I think the core of our regulatory approach is trying to tackle some of these things. We are working in collaboration with the sector in relation to mental health. Again, that was a problem before the pandemic; it is even more of a problem now. We are funding programmes looking at ways of tackling these issues, working closely with students. We funded Student Space, which is a digital platform, during the pandemic to try to provide support to students in relation to their mental health. I could carry on for a long time, but I think that work is fundamental to our approach.

Q38 **Anna Firth:** Can I just push back on a couple of things? Funding a student space is one thing, but what is far more important is getting back promptly to students who report problems with their mental health. I know of one student who reported extreme stress and asked for an extension to a dissertation, and there was no reply to that request. That is just inadequate. How do students who have inadequate support actually report this on a national scale? At the moment, students do not fully understand who they can report poor practice to.

Nicola Dandridge: I will answer briefly. We are doing much more to promote our notification system so that students and student unions know that they can report potential breaches to us. Separately, we are consistent in making sure that students are aware that if they have an individual complaint, they can pursue their complaint to the office of the independent adjudicator, which is the ombudsbody set up to tackle student complaints. The first port of call, of course, should be the university, to make sure that they are aware and can try to sort things out first. There are mechanisms available, but I agree that there is some confusion, and we need to do more to make sure that students are aware of these methods of recourse.

Q39 **Anna Firth:** We seem to have a lot of bodies but not enough action, frankly, on helping students with mental health concerns. However, we will come on to that again later. Could anyone else comment on my question about value for money before we move on?

Quintin McKellar: I was going to comment on mental health, if you will allow me. Of course, what you have just described in terms of not getting back to students is absolutely unacceptable, and we accept that, but the

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

universities as a sector are putting huge effort into trying to support their students with regards to mental health—all of us are investing more each year on mental health.

We do have issues. Triaging very serious mental health cases and not having access for students to proper professional advice through the national health service is a real issue for us. My staff are currently faced with students they basically have not been trained to deal with, but those students have nowhere to go, so they are dealing with them. So there is huge pressure in our universities to address this, but there is no easy answer, I'm afraid.

Q40 **Apsana Begum:** On the question of wellbeing, the wellbeing of staff has so far been absent from this conversation. In terms of future-proofing and improving the university sector and the student experience—I think those are two components of one thing—and given there are such terrible industrial relations and working conditions in the sector, the wellbeing of staff is a serious omission from the discussions that are happening about the university sector.

Professor Humphris: Apsana, the staff are the key to how better services and a better experience are delivered to students. The last two years have been a monumental stress on the sector. My university went remote in 10 days flat thanks to the extraordinary work of my staff—not just academics, but all my professional service colleagues—and we are still coming out of that. I am absolutely mindful of the pressure on my colleagues.

The learning we have taken out of that, in terms of working in an agile way, is opening up more opportunities. Every week I call staff all across the university, thanks to the joy of Teams, and hearing about the complex lives that people are managing while working has been humbling. But it has also made us think about how we work in the future, how we support students and how staff work in the future, so that we can improve the way they work and their productivity, but within the constraints of the unit of resource we now face.

Q41 **Apsana Begum:** You talk about resources. Given that staff appear to be very unhappy at the moment—that is evident through the repeated industrial action taking place, and research shows that half of staff are showing probable signs of depression—do you believe that there ought to be a new deal of sorts for university staff? And would you support this Committee further exploring staff morale and the effect of pay cuts and precarious work conditions?

Professor Humphris: The fact that the regulated undergraduate fee has been fixed for the next two years, and in the face of inflation and rising costs, will put fundamental pressure on every single institution. In two years, I wonder where we as a nation want to be in terms of funding and support for higher education. If we see it as a fundamental part of society in developing a cultured, civilised society with a productive economy, I think we will seriously need to have that debate.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Quintin McKellar: While I recognise what you are saying, it is not universal across the sector. Some universities have been affected to an extent by industrial action, others not at all. There has been quite a disparity and many of our staff have not taken industrial **action**.

Q42 **Apsana Begum:** But where it is taking place, some of these strikes are going on for really long **time**.

Quintin McKellar: But only involving a relatively small number of staff, and most universities where they have occurred have been able to ensure that the students receive appropriate teaching and learning during that **period**.

Q43 **Apsana Begum:** But management level at a number of those universities are threatening staff with 100% pay **deductions**.

Quintin McKellar: Indeed.

Chair: I am going to bring Kim in because she has to go in a bit, and then Caroline and then **Ian**.

Q44 **Kim Johnson:** The Chair started this session by talking about anti-racism. I would like to focus on deeply entrenched systemic racism that is prevalent in our society, as highlighted recently by the awful child Q case.

In universities, we know, because there is lots of research and evidence that supports this, that black students drop out and do not get the level of qualifications and degrees that they should. There is also an issue in terms of the transition to post-grad qualifications, as well as under-representation in staffing at senior levels at universities.

You have spoken this morning about having policies and procedures in place, but that does not seem to have impacted on addressing these major, significant issues. You only need to look around this room to see that under-representation and what it represents in our country today. I will start off with Clare this **time**.

Clare Marchant: I cannot talk about individual universities and their representation, but what I do agree with you on—and we have certainly done this at UCAS—is that it starts off with boards. And this is for every organisation, not just higher education institutions.

If at your board level—your governing body level—you haven't got representation, whether that is ethnic diversity or gender diversity, that is the starting point, because it is unlikely that you are going to have a mixture of views, a diversity of views, at your board that then selects a senior leadership team that also has a diversity of views and experiences and so on.

One of the things that we are doing very much is focusing on our board diversity—gender diversity, ethnic diversity and diversity of views. I think that that is where most universities—I am sure you will hear from Quintin or Debra—will be focusing, because that is where you crack it. Obviously, we all publish our EDI reports for all of our staffing group, but you have to crack it at those very senior levels.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: I know there is a lot to say, but it would be appreciated if you could be as concise as possible.

Quintin McKellar: This is a huge issue. When I began at the University of Hertfordshire, the attainment gap between—I have to say that we didn't specifically identify black students; it was black and Asian minority ethnic group.

Kim Johnson: I used the term "black" to cover all non-white people.

Quintin McKellar: But it is primarily black students, and we have to be clear about it. There is a big issue there about the granularity of the data that we have available. At my university the attainment gap was 27%, and it is now down to 12%. There has been huge success in addressing it, but it is still absolutely unacceptable that we have a 12% attainment gap. The attainment gap in the sector has come down by 3%, so some work is being effective. But I think the overall sector is now at 19%, so there is still a huge amount of work to do to get that attainment gap reduced to zero. We have targets for both total academic staff numbers that we wish to appoint from the BAME community—that's 25% in our university—and those achieving senior positions within the university, which is a target of 16%. So we are trying to address this; we are trying to do exactly what you have described, but of course it takes some time.

Professor Humphris: Kim, the first thing I did, as a gay woman, on taking over the appointment as vice-chancellor was to chair the equality and diversity committee. We were a long way back, my institution at Brighton. We have now made a lot of progress, and I am particularly proud that we have achieved the race equality charter mark. I am not interested in the badge; I am interested in the action. I'm talking about opening up the conversation and having all those conversations about race and inequality throughout our conversations, and about looking at recruitment—every single recruitment decision is an equality decision—and making sure everybody is appropriately trained when they are making those decisions. That's how we start to get change. We have got diversity on the board. I have got diversity on my senior team. We have set up a race and faith commission, chaired by an independent governor, to particularly look at the issues of race and faith in our institution and to have that open conversation, which previously had been closed down. We have a long way to go, but I am sure as hell going to keep shining a light in the corners.

Nicola Dandridge: I, too, recognise this as an extremely serious challenge. We collect the data on race and ethnicity for students, and we project that into university performance so that we are looking at the impact of drop-outs and graduate employment and recruitment through the lens of the impact of race. That can impact on the way we regulate universities. We particularly prioritised the black attainment gap when we started, because that was just so extreme, shocking and serious. That was reflected in the access participation plans that we have negotiated and agreed. We have looked at particular areas, such as the intersection between mental health and black men—well, black students generally but

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

men in particular—and we are targeting action in that area. We are funding a programme with UKRI and Research England, looking at black progression into research careers. So this is embedded in our regulatory approach, and then we have targeted programmes, on top of that, to try to deal with specific areas where we think we have most impact.

Kim Johnson: I just want to pick this up. There was mention before about Nottingham University, but I know that Nottingham University passed over a black graduate 15 times for research funding, and this happens on a regular basis. So maybe, instead of writing about the removal of an honorary professorship, the Common Sense Group of MPs should be looking at dealing with some of these deeply entrenched issues, which are so prevalent in our society today.

Q45 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I want to come back to Miriam's question about value for money for the taxpayer. Miriam talked about the £12 billion net spend on higher education each year, and I think that compares interestingly with our early years budget of £1.6 billion. Why should the taxpayer continue to put such a disproportionate amount into higher education, as compared with very young children's education? We know that early intervention is hugely—hugely—beneficial for improving life chances and life outcomes. Quintin spoke earlier of the challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending university, having had a poor prior educational experience—the difficulties that that poses for those students. Would it be better if we spent more of our money earlier, rather than all of it so late?

Quintin McKellar: The first thing to say is that I totally support your view that we should be spending more on early life.

Dr Caroline Johnson: But there is only so much.

Quintin McKellar: There is only so much.

Dr Caroline Johnson: It's choices, isn't it?

Quintin McKellar: I would only beg you to take it from somewhere else and not from higher education, because I think both are incredibly important.

Q46 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Do we need it in higher education, though, genuinely? If we spent it on early years education, would we need as much to keep correcting things that we just haven't done well earlier on?

Quintin McKellar: Well, I would suggest to you that we would have a better society by doing so—by spending on both younger people and higher education, because I think those young people would come through. I talked about the legacy of disadvantage; they wouldn't have had that legacy of disadvantage and so would be able to exploit the opportunities available to them in higher education more. So I would encourage you to do both.

Q47 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** But given the choice, I guess the question is how you divide that between the different areas of education.

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Professor Humphris: I am with Quintin. We know from the research evidence—I am particularly interested in how girls make decisions to go into engineering or STEM—that it is about how we rule decisions out of their lives at an early age. That is what the education research tells us. It is the infrastructure and the practitioners that are there to support early years provision which are also important. Across the University Alliance, we train lots of early years teachers, but we also see quite a bit of turnover in that workforce, so how do we create conditions to enable early years practitioners to keep at it and support children? It is absolutely vital that we support children at an early stage.

Q48 **Ian Mearns:** I just wanted to come back to this question around the wellbeing of students but also of staff. Quintin, you said industrial action was patchy, but even where industrial action is not taking place, we have some fairly good evidence that morale is not brilliant, and the fact that employers are planning to reduce the levels of staff pensions by significant amounts is not good for morale.

That will have an impact because the very young people who all those tutors, lecturers and professors with poor morale are actually teaching are the future recruits for the university system. There is a question there to be thought about by the employers, in terms of trying to do something to lift that sector. I understand the cost pressures, but at the moment I think an awful lot of people in the teaching profession within higher education are feeling a bit bruised.

I declare an interest: my partner is a tutor for the Open University so works exclusively online. She is aware of the people she works with feeling many of those issues. How are universities going to get over that? Increasing morale among the teaching staff will give a much better advertisement to the students who might be the recruits of the future.

Professor Humphris: I think we're coming out of a pandemic that has been extraordinary. As I said earlier, the pressures on people—my staff and staff across the whole of the University Alliance—have been extraordinary. Many of them have just gone absolutely over and above to support students to go remote, learn a whole new set of digital skills, do assessment, delay things, graduate students—we were graduating medical students and nurses early at the beginning of the pandemic to help the workforce in the NHS—so everybody has worked incredibly hard.

Then, I as the vice-chancellor am faced again with a constraint on the undergraduate regulated fee, which is the majority of my income, so I have less money. I still need to make strategic investments, I still need to pay the gas bill and there will be staff who really do seek increased pay to an expectation—

Q49 **Ian Mearns:** They have to pay the gas bill as well, don't they?

Professor Humphris: Yes, they have to pay the gas bill and so do I, and there is only a limited amount of resource to go round. So there are some really tough choices and I have worked really hard to keep all my staff

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

informed about the financial context of universities. We have to find ways of diversifying to bring income in. It is a real challenge.

Quintin McKellar: Very specifically on the USS pension scheme, you are absolutely correct that the total benefits to staff have been decreased. It is still an excellent scheme and it is still better than any scheme I know of in the private sector, so we have to put that in some sort of context. Of course we would love to pay our staff more, but Debra has made the point: £9,000 in 2012 is worth £6,500 by 2024. We simply do not have the cash. I think a third of all universities are currently in deficit, or were last year, and that will increase substantially without any kind of inflationary increases in tuition fees, I'm afraid.

Q50 **Ian Mearns:** The Government's response to the Augar review set out a number of proposals, including student number caps and minimum entry requirements. To what extent will the changes impact disadvantaged potential students or students?

Quintin McKellar: First, we would be very opposed to student number controls, for the obvious reason that we want anyone who has the ability to benefit from a university education to get that university education. Clearly, there has been an appetite in society for more people to come to university, and they have done so.

With regards to minimum entry requirements, of course, we all want our graduates to be both numerate and literate—that is simply stating the obvious. Therefore, I would suggest that GCSE English and maths are sensible metrics to look at. However, if you go back to my previous statements about the legacy of disadvantage and some students not getting those English or maths GCSEs, we have to think of other ways to ensure they can get them to get into university, if that is the only thing that is excluding them. We need to think very carefully about minimum entry requirements, but of course I understand where the Government or the OfS are coming from with regards to the particular ones that have been chosen and looked at.

Professor Humphris: From the University Alliance, our data shows that only 52% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve a grade 4 GCSE English and maths, so our worry is that a minimum entry, characterised in that way, will disadvantage students from poorer parts of the country and those who are most disadvantaged. I am also mindful of mature students. We deeply welcome the lifelong learning loan arrangement, but if we are going to apply those same criteria, we also need to think through how we enable people to access funding to support their ongoing education. It is a complex framework, set also within the OfS reconfiguration of regulation.

Clare Marchant: We did do some analysis to help with the original Augar review, but we have recently done some analysis at that GCSE English and maths level. Just to support what Debra is saying, I think it is about "Where are the impacts?" We certainly know that those on free school meals would be less likely to achieve those criteria—the minimum entry

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

requirements—but then you also have the geography point about different parts of the country being in different places when it comes to fulfilling that English and maths grade 4, and different groups, going back to the point Kim was raising about the black ethnic group and how they would fare. When you are looking at things, you have to be absolutely eyes wide open in terms of what the impact is UK-wide and also on specific courses, which is what Debra was talking about. The creative courses would definitely potentially suffer in this case.

Q51 **Ian Mearns:** Are you saying that you are definitely opposed to number caps, but you are accepting of some sort of minimum entry requirement generally?

Quintin McKellar: I think, reluctantly.

Ian Mearns: Reluctantly. Okay.

Quintin McKellar: And I think we would want to have safeguards in to ensure that those students who could achieve were given the opportunity to achieve in one way or another.

Q52 **Ian Mearns:** The thing that strikes me is if someone is going to be doing a course that does not really include an awful lot of mathematics, do they actually need a GCSE in maths? You might have a student who has a grade 1—the best grade—in English, but who does not have a qualifying GCSE in mathematics. Would that prevent them? Should it not be one or the other?

Quintin McKellar: It is a really good point. Particularly in some of the creative courses, we get students who come to us who are fabulous artists—fabulous imaginations, great creative individuals—but do not have a mathematics GCSE. That is exactly the point I am trying to make to you; that is where we would want to make sure that those individuals could be given the support to acquire that. We would all want our students to be numerate and literate, if I can suggest that.

Q53 **Ian Mearns:** In my lifetime, I have come across lots of individuals who do not have a GCSE in mathematics. They were not very good at algebra or trigonometry, but they can mark a dartboard, or put a bet on and work out how much they are going to get. They are number-savvy, but they do not have a GCSE. Should that preclude people from becoming an undergraduate?

Professor Humphris: That is an incredibly important point, Ian. How do we define the measure that we use for numeracy? Equally, I know people who did not get trigonometry, but they can run a spreadsheet and work out a business's profit and loss. What is the measure that we use and is there enough flexibility in that? Clearly, we want numerate and literate students, but is there enough flexibility in how we make these judgments if people did not take a GCSE but are running a small business and can navigate the tax system as well, and therefore are clearly numerate?

Quintin McKellar: Sorry to come in again—

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Q54 **Chair:** Just to interject briefly on this point, apprentices have to do functional skills. Why not, if people have not got a GCSE in maths or English, get them to do a functional skill, rather than say they cannot go and do a history degree because they do not have a maths GCSE?

Quintin McKellar: Absolutely. I was going to suggest that we are, as a sector, more effectively looking at contextualising specific individuals coming to university, where they have a particular background—or some previous disadvantage—which accounts for their position. Making contextual offers is a positive way forward.

Chair: Caroline and then Anna. Caroline first—you have waited an enormously long time.

Q55 **Caroline Ansell:** With huge interest. My question touches on many of the points already raised, whether that be value for money, student perception or the quality of the experience or the qualification. It is essentially about online learning. As you said Debra, it was an extraordinary achievement to move to remote learning in 10 days flat. However, my question is about the reset and recovery. My understanding, as a teacher myself, is that the quality of face-to-face learning is something that students very much appreciate. There is a concern around cost-cutting in straitened times, when you are having to make strategic choices. Nicola, what oversight do you have in that area? How can you ensure that the quality of the experience and the enhancement of learning, not cost-cutting, is the reason why online learning persists? Do you have a good understanding of how prevalent it is? I would be very interested in Clare's view on this too, because my understanding is that in UCAS publications and the like there is no declaration, description or disclosure of the balance of online and face-to-face teaching. That is very important for student expectations.

Nicola Dandridge: This is a very live issue for us at the moment. There are no Government restrictions now on returning to face-to-face teaching, so we have been very clear that we expect to see a return to it. The impression we have is that the overwhelming majority of students are now going back to face-to-face teaching. Our position throughout the pandemic, and now, is that it is not for us to determine the balance between face to face and digital. However, we are extremely concerned about the quality of provision, and the provision must also reflect student views. We have heard that some students found benefit in digital provision because of their personal circumstances. We have also heard very strongly from students who say they really need and want to go back to face to face—it is a mixed picture.

We took the view that we did not have a sufficiently granular understanding of what was going on and of where blended learning reflected good pedagogical reasons and where it reflected cost-cutting. Last week we announced a piece of work, which we will be doing very rapidly over the next few months, to look at examples and dive into the detail of what is happening at individual universities to work out what good looks like and what a potential breach of our regulatory conditions might



HOUSE OF COMMONS

look like in the context of blended learning. We aim to publish that by the summer.

- Q56 **Caroline Ansell:** Thank you. I think that will be extraordinarily important and insightful work. I look forward to seeing that. When you talk about digital provision, my understanding is that what students welcome is that lectures they have attended are recorded, so that they can revisit those lectures, which can be used for consolidation and revision or in case of absence. Are you looking at this through the frame of digital provision instead of face to face, or is it that additional added value?

Nicola Dandridge: It is both. Certainly, there is added value, and there can be huge benefits from that flexibility in the digital provision of lectures, which allows students to look at them again and go back to bits they did not understand. There can be benefits. Many students find face-to-face, in-person lectures of value as well, but the real concern is the small classroom provision. You can't really substitute that, unless of course it is a course that is designed to be online, which is a totally different proposition.

- Q57 **Caroline Ansell:** May I ask about the important study that you are going to do? What was that inspired by?

Nicola Dandridge: There have been a number of complaints from students about this, but we did not feel we had a sufficiently clear understanding, because the universities were telling us they had gone back to face to face, and yet we were receiving complaints from students saying it is not face to face, and we felt we did not have a sufficient understanding of where the provision might legitimately reflect student views and where it was inappropriate cost-cutting. It was a sense that we needed to better understand. We hope to be much clearer about what represents a breach of an OFS regulatory condition in this context and what does not. That will be of benefit to universities and to students, if we are clear about where we stand on this. At the moment I do not think we can do that, but we are moving very quickly on this and, as I say, we hope to publish something that will be of value by this summer.

- Q58 **Caroline Ansell:** Thank you for that. It will be interesting because we are in unprecedented times. On what the new standard might look like, I don't suppose you know what you are measuring against.

Nicola Dandridge: That is right, but on the other hand we have done work looking at the pedagogical benefits of online learning, and it would be a mistake to lose that sense that there are positives in the mix as well as potential negatives.

Caroline Ansell: It would be interesting to hear some of the positives and negatives from those at the chalkface.

Professor Humphris: If I go back to March 2021 when the DFE changed the regulations and allowed us to bring students back to campus for practical-based learning that you cannot do online, across the University Alliance our students came back into laboratories, studios, workshops—

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

into that really important practice-based learning. That was hugely appreciated and we have kept going ever since. We are back face to face, but I am also mindful that lecture capture, which was required at considerable investment in the infrastructure, was really appreciated by the students. They can go back and look at those lectures again. They can maybe attend for the first time in person, but then go back and refresh. If I have dyslexia or if my native language is not English, being able to go back and look at lectures again is helpful.

To be fair, back in the early '80s, all those gazillions of years ago, that was my experience when I was in a higher education college. If I missed a lecture, they recorded it on Betamax. Many people will not know that, but that is how old I am.

Caroline Ansell: I was there.

Professor Humphris: I used to heave out the massive great cassette and shove it in the massive great machine, so there is nothing new here, but we have a digital generation who can get all their lectures on their phone. We can make that available, and we will be going further, so I am grateful to be a recipient of funding from the OFS, which we bid for competitively. We will set up AR, VR and XR—whatever that is—in clinical skills, engineering skills and architecture. We are using the digital technology to take people into the skills they will need in the workplace going forward. It is not a cheap substitution; it is a natural evolution of pedagogy.

Q59 **Caroline Ansell:** Is it more aligned with the very practical courses of study that you are describing, and perhaps less so with languages or humanities?

Professor Humphris: It's nurses doing clinical skills. I would rather they test-landed an AR patient than a real one. We obviously had problems getting clinical placements during the pandemic. That has been a constraint. Engineering students working on an engineering rig in VR will be a safer way to learn and experiment. As much as young people now use those as part of their head screen and gaming environment, that is coming into the learning environment.

Caroline Ansell: To my mind what you are describing is enhanced learning—

Professor Humphris: Yes.

Q60 **Caroline Ansell:** That is rather than a trade-off with face to face and contact with lecturers. Do you see disadvantages, and do you see the concerns that have inspired the study? Have you been made aware of that?

Professor Humphris: Coming back to Ian's point about staff, there is a huge impact in this about reskilling people and reskilling my colleagues. It is not just academics. There is a whole set of extraordinary and wonderful technicians across our universities who are involved in this, so we need to think differently about who is supporting and enabling learning.

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Q61 **Caroline Ansell:** Do we need to move on? I am sold by how you describe the new realities that can be brought into learning, particularly around the medical professions, but I think the concern that has inspired the study is still something that could do with teasing out a little. Perhaps it is different with technical and more vocational courses. I am keen to understand whether you had any insight **there**.

Quintin McKellar: First, I think the whole sector wants to ensure that that reset that you talked about means that we come back with a better education system than we left with. I think everyone is on board with that. It is not either/or. It is not either online or face to face. In fact, I would even question the use of the term "online", because it is much more technology enhanced. The sort of simulations and practicals that Debra was talking about are massively important—lecture capture and so on. Just to add one little caveat, from when we have done surveys, it is often the commuting students and the more disadvantaged students who are actually more supportive of the online delivery than of the face-to-face delivery, because they can do it more easily. We have to be careful and ensure that we give that blended approach to allow them to get the advantages of flexibility that exist now because of the great transformation there has **been**.

Q62 **Caroline Ansell:** Does it undermine slightly the experience of leaving home, moving away to university and having that lived experience on campus if half your lectures are **online**?

Quintin McKellar: It absolutely does. It is a trade-off, but I would totally support your view that if we can get our students on to campus to get them the experience of the clubs, societies, engagement, sport and all the other stuff that goes with a university education, that is the optimal. However, many of these students cannot afford **it**.

Q63 **Anna Firth:** I am glad to hear you talking about enhanced learning. I think you would agree that the essence of learning is engagement, and the ability to meet a student where they are and take them forward from that point. On hybrid courses and enhanced learning, could you elaborate on how much of the online provision is live and interactive, because that is extremely important to the learning **experience**?

Professor Humphris: I am teaching next week. I teach an undergraduate nursing programme. It is a big group and, thankfully, they are all doing brilliantly. I deliver it online. I do a lecture and set up videos. They are all followed up with seminars. I am then available on a live chat through Teams. Some students will not want to put their cameras on during an online session, but I am always there. Anybody can contact me, and we will have a conversation. They will follow up with emails. I am just going and doing one lecture, but the tutor for the course is who will be following up on that student.

I get some really excellent, challenging questions, which is fantastic. We are able to link up. Unlike me just standing in a lecture theatre, saying, "Let me tell you about systematic reviews", there is an extraordinary range of resources we can link students to. You can go and watch the

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

NICE video on how to do a systematic review. It really matters that you understand how you access the evidence base and how those decisions are made, so I think it has opened up.

Q64 **Anna Firth:** I am very interested in that, and I would love to talk to you about that all day, but I want to be absolutely clear, because I am being the voice of students a bit here today. I am pleased to hear that you consider that the overwhelming majority of universities are going back to face-to-face teaching. You know that we have evidence that 90% of students strongly prefer in-person teaching and that *The Telegraph* has recently reported that, out of 24 Russell Group universities, only Birmingham has stated that all teaching was going back to being in person. Can you give us some more detail on the overwhelming majority? How many universities are going back to face-to-face teaching, by when, and what is the proportion of face to face versus enhanced online learning?

Chair: Can you try to do it in a nutshell, please? We have not got all day.

Nicola Dandridge: In a nutshell, I think there is so much sitting behind that, because some of it is about, as I say, strong pedagogical reasons for going digital, and some of it may not be. It can vary not only at Department level, but at course level. It is an impossible question to answer, which is why we need to do this piece of work. It is an important question, but I do not think it is possible to answer on behalf of our sector at the moment.

Q65 **Chair:** Should universities require students to wear masks? A lot of them do.

Professor Humphris: Certainly, the Government regulations, as set out by DFE—

Chair: They say that they are not needed.

Professor Humphris: At my university, we have our covid awareness, and we are looking to people to take sensible decisions, especially as we watch the covid rate, so handwashing and face coverings are strongly encouraged—but I cannot make them do so.

Q66 **Chair:** Even though the Government's advice is that that is not needed anymore?

Professor Humphris: Well, it is for individuals to make choices, isn't it?

Q67 **Chair:** Is it for individual students to make those choices if you are telling them that they have to wear them?

Professor Humphris: We have a covid-aware approach, which is that we would encourage them to.

Q68 **Chair:** Why is that? Adults do not wear them in offices, and they are not required in schools anymore. Why are universities affected by this?

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Humphris: I cannot speak for every other university; I can only speak about mine.

Chair: No, but you can speak about the University Alliance and its members.

Professor Humphris: I think it is for people to make informed decisions. The virus is still with us, and obviously there has been a slight increase in the virus recently. But it is going to be with us forever.

Quintin McKellar: I think Debra's point is that every university was complying with the restrictions when they were there. As the restrictions have eased, every university has, I think, adopted slightly different approaches to it—some being completely liberal, if that is the correct word, and others making strong advice. It differs even within universities—for instance, there are nursing students who are being advised in a different way from the general population of students simply because they are likely to end up in a different work environment.

Chair: I notice that you have come here today without a mask.

Professor Humphris: It is in my pocket—

Chair: Do you walk around with it all the time?

Professor Humphris: It is in my pocket, and I asked your Clerk when I came in, "Are we masking or not masking?"

Q69 **Chair:** I ask because, given that the National Deaf Children's Society and many others have said that masks are a significant impediment, especially to young people with disadvantages, I still do not understand why you are making it a requirement when the Government say that they are not needed, and schools do not have to require them. Adults do not have to wear them in offices, yet you are saying that that has to happen.

Professor Humphris: No, I am not making that a requirement; I am encouraging people. People make their own decisions.

Chair: That is not the way it came over a moment ago. You said that—

Professor Humphris: We are covid aware.

Chair: But the fact is that a significant number of universities are still telling their students to wear masks, despite all the disadvantages of masks, particularly to disadvantaged students.

Professor Humphris: As Quintin said, though, that is the decision of every individual institution.

Q70 **Tom Hunt:** I understand why, at particular stages of the pandemic—particularly when covid was at its most prevalent and we were not vaccinated—online learning was necessary. However, looking at it as a whole, I do not think the right balance has been struck. I have spoken about this with a lot of students who have been appalled at some of the

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online learning that has been provided. I think there is a big difference between live and online lectures. I have been given evidence by students of pre-recorded lectures that were the same as the year before. Every student to whom I have spoken has said that they have been very disappointed by their university, and that they have not gone back to in-person learning quickly enough. It must be an option, so that if you want to go into a lecture or a seminar in person, you can. If there is the option to do so remotely, if that suits you, then okay.

Have you been frustrated by the number of universities that have perhaps not been as liberal as they could have been in promoting quality education, and have perhaps been too risk averse? Would you like the Office for Students to have more powers to influence the situation if it were to happen again?

Nicola Dandridge: The piece of work that I have described has a tough regulatory edge to it. If we find that there is online provision that is cost-cutting and not of sufficient quality, we will regulate; we have quite far-reaching powers to do that. Although I described it as fact-finding, because it is fact-finding, it is also looking at those facts with a view to determining what is a potential breach of our regulatory condition and what is not, so I do not think we need new powers.

I should add that we published earlier this month the results of recalibrated and retargeted quality conditions, which will come into effect from 1 May. They will enable us—for the first time, actually—to be really much tougher and more robust in regulating on quality. You put those two things together and I think that we have the powers that we need.

Q71 **Tom Hunt:** That is very good to hear, but I just think that the impact that this had on the tuition of many people is just devastating. More should have been done to try to ensure that there is social distancing, particularly with lectures; I am pretty sure that you can socially distance in lectures.

Also, there is the lack of data. We still don't know as a Committee—we hear positive things, which is consistent with what I have been hearing when talking to different universities about them all going back to in-person real-time teaching, but we do not have the data. My concern is that there are still a lot of universities that are really dragging their feet, and for students paying huge sums of money for tuition, I don't think that is acceptable.

Nicola Dandridge: I agree and I share your concerns. During the pandemic, there was an incredibly difficult balance to strike, between acknowledging the impossible pressures on universities and yet the scale of the challenges that students were having to deal with.

That was then; now we're in a different place. We share your frustration that we do not know—as I say, it can vary hugely, not just from department to department, but from course to course. It is not a straightforward situation, where we can identify a university, pull a lever

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

and say, "You're in breach"; it really is not like that at all. That is why we need to do this piece of work.

However, we are moving very quickly on it. It's a real priority. We will report by the summer. The purpose of doing that is so that it can be in place for the new academic year. We are on the case on this.

Q72 **Dr Johnson:** I think this is one of those situations where we could have benefited from hearing from students about what they think. Perhaps I can give a couple of examples of students who I have heard about, either directly or from their families within my constituency.

Someone studying physics at Leeds said: "I have met my tutor once. I have had this year no in-person lecture, workshop or tutorial. Many of the lectures are pre-recorded or click-through PowerPoint presentations." That is a physics student; they might have expected some practical work in there.

Even more practical work would be expected for an adult nursing student, and one in Colchester says: "I could count on one hand how many face-to-face interactions I have had this year."

People are not happy with what they are getting. With very many of these students, it has affected their mental health, because they are going somewhere miles away from home to sit in a room. They do not know who else is on the course, because they have never met them because they have never been to any lectures with them, and they are feeling very isolated and lonely. Staring at a screen all day is a pretty miserable existence.

That said, I recognise that if you are someone with a family—perhaps trying to bring up a baby—and are working from home and finding it very expensive to travel, there may be benefits to an online education; we have had the Open University for a long time.

I wonder if we could consider some transparency as being beneficial. Perhaps when people are asked to fill in their UCAS form next October to apply for universities, universities should have to tell them what proportion of lectures were face to face in the summer term of this year for their specific course at that specific university. If they were forced to do that—you announce it this Easter break—then next half-term we will see an awful lot more face-to-face tuition for students going forwards.

The important thing is that students are paying £9,000 a year. This is a lot of money. This is a contract. They are expecting something; they are not getting it. If we are transparent and a student is told, "Half of your lectures will be online", and they pay for that, good on them—that is what they are getting. They have a hold over the university if that is not what is delivered, unless the Government changes the rules on lockdown again. At the moment, however, they are casting their money into the unknown, unfortunately.

Clare Marchant: Can I come in on that? There is one cohort of students that we have not talked about here, which I think is worth drawing

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

attention to, and then I will address the transparency point that you have rightly made.

That cohort is what we would call pre-applicants, those who are looking and exploring in that discovery phase of going to university. What we are hearing from them—very clearly: as I said, it is 750,000 of them a year—is that with things like open days and making the right choice, they want those things face to face. However they want a choice; they want both. They want to be able to do it face to face, and they want it online if it best suits and is more convenient. There is a bit of a parallel there between those students who are exploring the opportunity and then what they expect when they are at university as well.

Back to your transparency point about “What am I going to get when I am on this course?”, certainly in our near-to-peer and peer-to-peer services, that is one of the best ways. It is a bit of a movable feast in some courses, if you have a tutor who suddenly gets covid and is not there. So some of those tools can help with that movable-feast piece, but I would welcome anything we can do in terms of information, advice and guidance that brings that transparency. I was at a big sixth-form college in Cambridge last week and all the students we are talking to are saying, “I want the choice, and I also want transparency, so I know what I am going to get.”

Chair: Would you answer briefly? Do you want to come in for that and then Quintin can answer?

Q73 **Dr Johnson:** You people sat in front of us have the power to say to universities, “You must provide this information; we will deliver it to students at UCAS,” so that when people fill in their UCAS form they know what they are contractually going for. If they want, because it suits them, to have a mostly face-to-face course, they can apply for one. If they want one that is going to be online, they can apply for one. They get that choice. At the moment, they are not getting that choice; it is being hidden from them. In my view, that is completely wrong and it is something that you can solve virtually overnight.

Quintin McKellar: I would briefly say, I am a supporter of transparency to the extent that you can deliver it, but we have to be really careful that we are talking about the quality of delivery. There are some incredibly good online courses and there are some people who are incredibly good at delivering face to face. There are some appalling online courses and there are some appalling face-to-face courses.

Q74 **Chair:** Students are paying the nine-plus grand, whatever they get. There is the issue. Apart from the Open University, where they know what they are getting.

Quintin McKellar: The Open University and the University of London distance learning programme, of course, absolutely. The point is that the students are currently being fed the message in every media outlet I have seen that face to face is good and online is bad, and that is not necessarily true.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q75 **Dr Johnson:** Do you think it is good for an adult nursing student to have had less than a handful of face-to-face lessons this year?

Quintin McKellar: No, I don't.

Q76 **Dr Johnson:** Do you think it is reasonable for a physics student to have met his tutor in person once and have had no in-person lectures, practicals, workshops or tutorials throughout the year?

Quintin McKellar: Not at all; that is not what I'm saying.

Q77 **Dr Johnson:** I think that is completely unacceptable.

Quintin McKellar: That is not what I'm saying, though, but I just think we have got to be careful that we do not drive universities to deliver in a way that is fundamentally less good.

Q78 **Dr Johnson:** If students have the choice, they will be delivering what their customers require.

Quintin McKellar: Well, indeed, but also students are being fed, I would have said through the media, a particular perspective of what good is.

Q79 **Chair:** That is not the case. Whatever the media are saying, Caroline cited students; I have had students saying the same thing to me and we have all got it. We could sit here all day, as you were suggesting earlier, citing the experiences of individual students not getting face-to-face teaching, or enough of it, even though they paid the nine-plus grand.

Quintin McKellar: Certainly the surveys we have done—don't get me wrong, the majority of students absolutely would like to have more face to face and I totally support that.

Q80 **Chair:** I knew you were going to say surveys and everyone thinks it is wonderful and hunky-dory, but I have surveys that show otherwise.

Quintin McKellar: I am not suggesting for a minute that everyone thinks it is hunky-dory. What I am suggesting is that there is a proportion of students who disagree with that and who like online delivery, for the obvious reasons that we have been talking about.

Q81 **Dr Johnson:** Would it be reasonable, then, to ask students to provide that? Would your universities be happy to provide that information for their courses and the proportion of lectures or tutorials delivered face to face for that particular course at that particular university to students at the end of next term? So people will know that that is a typical term. Okay, there may have been someone off, but it will be balanced out across the universities. So, over a term, that is what I can roughly expect to get.

Chair: I suggest the OfS answer that, given it is so central to your work.

Nicola Dandridge: I have two comments on that. First, I agree; I think that information should be available. It is a basic consumer protection right that you should know what you are buying. I find that self-evident, so the answer to that is yes. Second, can I have the details of those



students so we can look into them, because that does not sound right to me at all?

Q82 : To push back on this face-to-face point, I accept from a pedagogical point of view that there are some courses that are better delivered online **Miriam Cates**, or they are equally good, and that there are some convenience aspects. However, going back to our earlier point about the experience of university and that potentially being one of the values to society, employers are saying that young people do not have the soft skills they need. Those are soft skills that you can only develop in a face-to-face environment, in collaboration with peers, reading body language and learning confidence to present. I suspect that one of the reasons so many students want online is because you can hide, and it doesn't force you to make those challenging interventions and put yourself at risk. That concerns me deeply in the context of free speech and the soft skills, so do you not think there is an alternative reason, other than just pedagogical or convenience, for pushing for as much face to face as possible? I will go to you, Quintin.

Quintin McKellar: I don't disagree with anything you have just said. As someone already said and as I absolutely believe, one of the crucial things about universities is getting that interaction. You can, though, get quite effective interaction online, as we are all aware. We have been living it for the last two years.

Miriam Cates: It is not quite the same.

Quintin McKellar: I totally agree with you that it is not the same.

Q83 **Chair:** If they want online—this goes back to Caroline's point—a pure online service with a little bit of face to face, they could go to the excellent Open University, which is much cheaper. They are paying you guys £9,000-plus and expecting to get face-to-face teaching, and too many of them are not getting enough of it. That is what I don't understand. You don't seem to acknowledge that that is an issue.

Quintin McKellar: No, sorry, I am totally acknowledging it is an issue, but I am very in favour of a blended approach—an approach that embraces both, that includes the technologies that enhance education that can be delivered online, but also gives you the face-to-face experience and brings students on to campus. I am an absolutely fervent believer in that.

Q84 **Dr Johnson:** Just on this particular point, I have a medical degree. I vividly remember my lectures in embryology being drawn in coloured chalks all over the blackboard and having to keep up with my coloured pens. If that was done online, how would I know that I was not getting last year's lecture, or in five years' time, how would I know that the same lecture was not just being replayed every year? If you are charging people £9,000 a year, they are presumably expecting something that is fairly fresh and new. Presumably they could be charged an awful lot less if you could replay last year's lectures and those from the years before.

Nicola Dandridge: The new regulatory conditions that I described—the ones that will come into play in May—address precisely that. They require

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courses to be up to date, so you cannot just rehash old ones. It is very much targeted at that sort of thing. There is a debate about what “up to date” is, and clearly that will vary from discipline to discipline, but it is getting at the point that you have just identified.

Q85 **Anna Firth:** Don't you think there might be a correlation between the fact that 52% of students have reported feeling lonely and isolated at university and the fact that universities are not returning to face to face? We all know that when you meet people face to face, it is about more than just the learning; it is about the relationship and the human contact. I would like to hear that you recognise that. That is the main reason why we must get the majority of these courses back to being face to face.

Secondly, can you explain why so many exams are still online? I find that utterly baffling. I could not understand why on earth they were online in the first place, because a more socially distant experience is difficult to fathom. That is the whole point of an exam, so that really does need to be addressed.

The third point is that there is a massive imbalance in power between the universities that are selling the courses and the students who are looking at the courses. Why don't universities, at the same time as they publish the percentage of lectures that are online and face to face, publish the Open University fees alongside, so that students can see there is an option to pay a third of the cost per year and study completely online at the Open University—although even the Open University has regular meet-ups and sessions where there is face to face—if they so prefer?

Chair: Exactly. That is a very good point. Can I start off with you, Nicola? I would ask you to answer very briefly, because I want to come very quickly on to degree apprenticeships and one or two other things.

Nicola Dandridge: It goes back to informed choice, really. It is really important that students have all the options in front of them in a way that is dispassionate, in terms of not driving one particular outcome as being the right one for them, and not necessarily driven by their parents or others. That should include degree apprenticeships; they should have all this information available, including the Open University, but I think I agree with your premise.

Obviously, UCAS has a huge role in communications here, but we also fund Discover Uni, which is designed to get exactly these options out to students. We work quite closely with schools; we align it with our Uni Connect programme, and so on. There is a lot of work going on. It is about informed, dispassionate choice that is right for the student, so basically, I agree.

Professor Humphris: I have three points. There is one piece I would like focus on, which is the piece around loneliness and students. As a vice-chancellor, I have a reference group of first years, and we meet on a regular basis, so that they keep this aged woman in touch with their experience.

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Last time we met—the week before we last—we talked about transition, that whole point about the transition to university. They are a real mix of ages and courses, and it was incredibly powerful, as I always find with my students. It is about those connections, those friendships, and about how we support that transition when they make those networks.

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One other thing they highlighted was the value in group-based assessment and projects. I saw one of those live during International Women's Day. A group of students in our School of Business and Law, who were responsible for marketing, selling and broadcasting the event about International Women's Day, learned a whole set of skills about interacting with people, managing the product and delivery and following up on that.

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There are lots of ways that we need to work to help loneliness, but it is also about how we use assessment and assessment tasks as real ways to get that group work together, to get those skills going.

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Quintin McKellar: That is a really good point. My student union has identified that the number of students joining clubs and societies has decreased this year. They believe—and I would support them—that, in a sense, students have forgotten how to do that and how to engage. We need to rekindle that, for sure.

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Clare Marchant: I don't think that is exclusive to universities. I look at my own organisation, and bringing people back into the office, back engaging, getting those softer skills, lots of businesses are really having to lean in proactively to get people to engage in that way, after two years of engaging only digitally.

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I go back to the fact that there is a choice, but there is proactively encouraging them to come into some of those face-to-face pieces. I think your question about side-to-side parity of choice, and seeing those side to side—that is exactly what UCAS hub does. It has it side by side, whether that is through undergraduate degrees or something more remote, or a degree apprenticeship. I am happy to share some of that.

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Q86 **Chair:** Thank you. I have a couple of questions. We did a report into white working-class boys and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. At every stage of the education system, they underperformed compared with most other ethnic groups. When it comes to university, they are the lowest-performing group in getting into HE, apart from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. Nicola, what are you doing about that specific problem, given that that is the largest ethnic group in our country?

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Nicola Dandridge: This is one of the issues that the new director of fair access and participation, John Blake, will be taking up. He has signalled a wish to renegotiate access and participation plans, ensuring that the experiences of white working-class men and women are factored into that centrally. That is very much part of his new strategy.

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Q87 **Chair:** Clare, what do you do at UCAS to try to change that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Clare Marchant: There are three things here. One is that we know it starts in early years. Going back to the early years point, this is not something that materialises in white males at 17 or 18 years. All of the outreach stuff that universities are doing, or with part of their access and participation plans, becomes really important for this cohort of students.

Secondly, there are early signs of positivity in terms of the entry rate, if you look at 2021. There's still loads to go on this. I would go back to very early information, advice and guidance. Going back to something Quintin said earlier, in year six at the end of primary, some particularly disadvantaged students—this cohort of students—are ruling in or out options for themselves, perhaps not in choices they make, but what is seen as aspirational for them.

Getting to early secondary, with potential options for them in their careers, will raise aspiration, as well as the attainment piece that needs to be done through access and participation plans.

Q88 **Chair:** The IFS report in February 2020, said that one in five students would have been better off financially if they had not gone to university. That was before covid hit properly. Do you not find that particularly worrying? Does that not explain the feeling out there about whether universities are providing value for money to the student and the taxpayer?

Quintin McKellar: Or course, four in five are gaining by going to university. The one in five who do not, may not have gone to university because they have a particular view of lifetime earnings as being their goal. They go for all sorts of reasons.

Q89 **Chair:** These are the ones who have been to university. It is still a huge number.

Quintin McKellar: There is still a significant graduate premium associated with going to university. Those who go to university still on average earn significantly more than those who don't.

Q90 **Chair:** Still, 20% are saying they would have been better off financially if they had not gone to university. We know that many graduates are sadly not getting graduate jobs in many universities, when they come out—a significant proportion. My question again: are universities providing value for money to the student and to the taxpayer?

Professor Humphris: That is an absolutely fair challenge. It was years ago and will continue to be. From the perspective of the University Alliance where the vast majority of our provision is about professional technical pathways, my experience is that the students will come to us because they know the profession or the job they are after, whether it is a nurse, social worker, teacher, engineer, pharmacist, or medic. There is huge value in that in terms of getting them through, but even if you are a newly-qualified social worker, you are not going to be earning a lot of money at the beginning.

Q91 **Ian Mearns:** Is there not a major connection in terms of where people go

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

and their outcomes, in terms of the social capital that they have before they get in there in the first place? It is a question of how much the university, as an institution, is adding value to the life of the individual that they didn't have before. An awful lot of young people who go to university have already got a significant amount of social capital in terms of the connections, background, upbringing, etc. That is a major research bit, in terms of selling it.

Before, Quintin was saying that people who go to university are healthier. Of course they are, because the people who don't go to university are from the poorer backgrounds. It is not rocket science from that perspective. I think you have a selling job to do, but you also need to do some self-analysis to see what can be done.

Quintin McKellar: We absolutely acknowledge and agree that the outcomes are to some extent significantly influenced by the inputs, so individuals whose parents are more advantaged tend ultimately to be more advantaged whether they go to university or not. I totally agree with that.

A significant number, perhaps 20%, of people who go to university, for instance in the creative industries and so on, do so for reasons other than necessarily their view of lifetime earnings.

Q92 **Ian Mearns:** You cited the statistic that on average people who go to university earn a lot more, but of course the average earnings of university graduates are dragged up by a relatively small number at the very top end who really drag the average upwards. You have some selling to do, from my perspective anyway.

Q93 **Chair:** Many of the questions, and a lot of the answers in my view, go back to your brilliant article in *The Times* about degree apprenticeships. You earn while you learn, you are virtually guaranteed to get a job, and that is not happening with graduates. You get a skilled job. There is no debt, so you are helping the disadvantaged. It is good for part-time students as well. That is why I am very passionate about this. It also meets the skills needs of our nation.

I will start with you, Clare, given your *Times* article. The problem is that not enough younger people are doing it. There is a lot of bureaucracy in the way. My own preference would be to have 50% of students doing degree apprenticeships over the next 10 years and to have a proper UCAS—I know you will say there is a sort of one—a genuine UCAS for FE and apprenticeships, that would go alongside the existing one, that people would fill out at the same time. What do you think needs to be done to rocket-boost degree apprenticeships and ensure that they not only reach the most disadvantaged, but become a widespread offering in a huge number of areas?

Clare Marchant: There are two things in the short to medium-term that could be done. First, we have very big multinational firms, be it Rolls-Royce or Vodafone, advertising apprenticeships with us, but actually we know that 95%-plus of businesses are small and medium-sized

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

enterprises, so how do we get the supply of apprenticeships in small and medium businesses? That is a big one because we know, for 18 or 19-year-olds, there were only 3,600 starts last year, but tens of thousands of 18-year-olds were coming through us saying they are interested in them. There is a supply piece first and foremost that urgently needs tackling.

Secondly, we know that half of the 750,000 said they were interested in degree apprenticeships, but they are navigating the information via some guidance or understanding of where to go. We are investing massively in that because that is a good short-term win. To the medium and long term, I am absolutely where you are, which is that we want to be in a place in a few years' time where you are effectively looking at a basket of choices. Some of them would be traditional three or four-year undergraduate degrees and some would be degree apprenticeships, and you are mixing and matching them. You have a basket that covers both. That is absolutely where we need to go. The key is not to say, "Well, it is easy to navigate through UCAS into university." Yes, it is because we have spent a long time building that up with teachers and advisers. We need to get teachers and advisers working with us to make it just as easy to go into alternative routes.

Q94 **Chair:** Should there be a proper UCAS for FE and apprenticeships?

Clare Marchant: Absolutely. That is where we are headed.

Q95 **Chair:** Is it a genuine one? One of the reasons why teachers do not encourage it—there are many reasons for kids to do apprenticeships and FE—is because they have the UCAS form and the whole culture is around university. If this was all done at the same time, it would make a huge difference because the students would have that offer in all at once.

Clare Marchant: Absolutely. We have had lots of conversations with Universities UK and the University Alliance about developments in this area, because of course they can do degree apprenticeships at university, so it is not an either/or. Having that integrated approach in terms of the application is where we are headed.

Q96 **Chair:** That's the beauty of it because you get both experiences. Does anyone else want to comment?

Professor Humphris: Across the University Alliance we are major providers of degree apprenticeships, and we embrace them with gusto. If you want to accelerate take-up, one thing we would encourage you to do is look at the regulatory environment, because we are caught between OfS and Ofsted and they are completely different regulators. That is a burden of regulation in an approach within an autonomous higher education institution in which, "You need to trust us to regulate." We are strongly regulated. If there was a way of finding some cut through in that, we would just go further and faster.

Q97 **Chair:** Does the OfS, as a regulator, try to limit the bureaucracy and encourage universities to have degree apprenticeships?

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Nicola Dandridge: We promote degree apprenticeships where we can through our IAG and in our mechanisms and structures. We see them as a completely essential and important part of the piece. I don't think it is our job to tell universities to offer them, but we think they are a really good thing, so we will do what we can in a less coercive way.

Quintin McKellar: We think they are fantastic.

Chair: I think I met some of them when I visited your university as well, which was a pleasure.

Quintin McKellar: There are a couple of things that might help. It would be helpful if more universities could be allowed on to the register of apprenticeship training providers. There is currently a bit of a block in getting universities on to it. Secondly, it is actually cost-efficient to provide apprenticeships and learning experiences where you are getting them from large businesses when you can get a cohort size. Clare's point about the SMEs is really important. It is effectively not cost-effective to have 20 learners from 20 different businesses. Please be reassured that we are doing that, but the funding model does not work for that kind of cohort. As Debra has said, Ofsted is a particular issue for us. We will learn to live with Ofsted, but it is a new experience for us and we need to be educated in it.

Chair: Thank you very much. We have had questions on issues from antisemitism to online learning, so that is a pretty wide variety of questions. I really appreciate all that you do and appreciate your time today. I wish you all well. Thank you to your institutions and your staff.

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