



Appointment of the Chair of the Office for Students -

House of Commons - Committee Summary - Education Select Committee

2nd February 2021

Witnesses:

Lord Wharton of Yarm, preferred candidate for chair, Office for Students (OFS).

Overview

The Committee questioned Lord Wharton of Yarm, preferred candidate for Chair, Office for Students (OFS) on his views on various issues related to the work of the OFS and on the Higher Education (HE) sector more generally.

HE take-up by demographic

Chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) noted that DfE data showed a 19 percentage point gap in progression rates to HE between free schools meals and non-free school meals students. He asked how this discrepancy should be tackled.

In response, Wharton said the OFS had a role in this area which could be further expanded; he said every HE institution had to make a participation access plan and more could be done to encourage progress in this area.

Asked by Halfon if the £20m reduction for University Connect would impact on the OFS participation objective, Wharton said it depended on how it was run; he said the signal that support for hardship would be there was important.

Ethnicity and university access

Halfon noted white students were the ethnic group less likely to progress to university (at 38 per cent). In response, Wharton said he would make this a high priority and said it was in line with the levelling-up agenda. He noted changes to the degree-level apprenticeship sector and said such non-traditional routes into university would help improve access figures.

Kim Johnson (Lab, Liverpool Riverside) noted a problem with young black children entering HE, which she said was because of systemic racism. Wharton said degree-level apprenticeships could be part of the answer and said movements such as BLM were an opportunity to shine a light on such issues; he said HE institutions whilst autonomous had to focus on improving access.

Asked by Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) to comment on BAME access to Russell Group universities, Wharton said he agreed that such institutions were more likely to be seen as unattainable by BAME students and said there was a need to "go further" on work to enhancing access and opening up the sector.

Part-time students

Asked by Halfon what could be done to address the decline in part-time education, Wharton said there was an opportunity to use lifetime learning budgets to enable people to further their education via part-time study. He said during the pandemic a lot more learning had been done online and this would likely be a key medium for the future which would allow much more flexibility.

Open University

Asked by Halfon what could be done to support Open University (OU), Wharton said he was a big fan of OU and said it had provided a huge variety of different opportunities to people. He said he wanted to work closely with OU to improve their future offer and support them where they could; he said it was clearly OU was going to be particularly important in the future.

Degree apprenticeships

Halfon said he felt the OFS should set a target that 50 per cent of degrees should be degree apprenticeships. In response, Wharton said a 50 per cent target would be an extraordinary shift given the low take-up at present; he said whilst he shared Halfon's sentiment he did not want to make such a large commitment which could not then be followed through.

50 per cent university target

Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich) asked whether the previous 50 per cent target for young people to go to university had been incorrect. In response, Wharton said he agreed that the target was too arbitrary and blunt but that as many people as possible should be able to benefit from HE.

Personal background and OFS role

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked Wharton how he had come across this role and whether he had been encouraged to apply to it. In response, Wharton said he had had a strong interest on education issues when a local MP; he said after not being re-elected in 2017 he wanted to take another role in which he was involved in public service and had been looking at various public appointments.

Begum questioned Wharton on his views on the function of a regulator. He said it was important the OFS recognised the autonomy of universities but needed to ensure those who engaged with the HE sector got value for money. He said the OFS should take a light touch when things were going well but should intervene when things weren't going well.

David Simmonds (Con, Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) asked whether Wharton would retain the Conservative Party whip in the Lords and his approach to any legislation bringing about a conflict with his new role. Wharton said he had discussed this with the whips and had made clear that in issues where this was conflict with his OFS role he would have some latitude to vote against or speak against issues.

In response to a question by Ian Mearns (Lab, Gateshead), Wharton said he had updated his Lords interests and was not aware of any conflicts of interest. Johnson said Wharton's role at Policy Exchange was a potential conflict of interest; Wharton said he had not participated in any education-related work with this body.

Student Panel

Asked by Wharton to comment on the Student Panel, Wharton said everything he had heard had been positive. He said he wanted the panel to look at the issue of students who ought or could be going to university but were not for some reason.

International students

David Johnston (Con, Wantage) said some universities concentrated too much on attracting international students rather than focusing on widening participation at home. Wharton said the money from international students should be used to pursue additional participation from under-represented groups at home. He said he was looking to take up this issue when appointed.

Free speech issues

Hunt said some students were concerned about a perceived lack of free speech at university and whether Wharton saw the OFS as having any role on this issue.

In response, Wharton said some elements of this in extremis could impact on access issues. He said he did not like 'moves away from free speech'.

Antisemitism

Christian Wakeford (Con, Bury South) asked for comment on universities adopting the IHRA definition of antisemitism.

In response, Wharton said he did not think any university should not adopt it and any instances where it had not been adopted should be investigated. He said he did not think freedom of speech was an excuse for antisemitism and speech in conflict with the IHRA.

NUS Covid campaign / Covid provision /bailouts

Anderson asked Wharton if he supported the aims of the NUS 'Students Deserve Better' campaign on education provision during Covid.

Wharton said he was a student union officer himself at university and would seek to work with the NUS. He said he supported many of the aims of the campaign 'in a broad sense' but said this did not imply 100 per cent support.

Anderson asked whether monetary penalties should be imposed on universities in case where academic rigour was slipping due to online courses. Wharton said penalties would not be necessary other than as a last resort.

Asked by Halfon what a student should be doing if they felt their learning was of poor quality, Wharton said this was 'difficult for the OFS to comment on as it related to individual student contracts. He said there was a strong case for the OFS to be looking at the student-university contractual relationship in general; he said he agreed that at present the ability of a student to challenge their teaching quality was bureaucratic and slow but that ultimately a student had to make a complaint.

Mearns raised the issue of students being charged rents for properties they could not at present occupy. Wharton said he would look at what the appropriate role of the OFS was in examining whether student

contracts were fit for purpose. He said it was clear that Covid had highlighted potential shortcomings in contracts.

Anderson said some universities felt they were not receiving enough funding for losses incurred due to Covid. Wharton said he had not heard specific concerns from universities on this issue but said he was happy to engage with universities.

Asked by Wakeford to comment on bailout funding for universities, Wharton said there was a need to distinguish between the current period and a time into the medium to long term; he said in general there was a role for government in ensuring universities did not shut down "over the weekend".

Student poverty

Mearns noted a joint study by Sheffield and Northumbria universities suggested 40 per cent of students were currently facing problems feeding themselves. He also noted issues related to intentional student poverty. In response, Wharton said this was clearly a problem stemming from Covid and there was a need to make sure that hardship funding prioritised dealing with such issues.

Further Education White Paper / Universities

Hunt noted the FE White Paper had suggested local businesses needed to have a greater role in the courses offered at local FE colleges and asked whether this approach might be extended to universities.

Wharton said this was a legitimate point to consider; he said there were a number of ways business could add input, such as on the employability skills from each course and more interventionist approaches related to whether OFS grants should target particular courses.

Teaching Excellence Framework

Anderson said only 22 per cent of HE institutions used the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and over half of applicants had not heard about it at all. He asked if Wharton was going to change the TEF.

In response, Wharton said he had seen conflicting information on how many students used the TEF; he said the OFS was currently reviewing the TEF in the light of the Pearce Review. Wharton said whilst the did not want to pre-judge the OFS consultation he said the TEF needed to stay in an improved form which enhanced the ability of student to use it to assess courses.

Number of universities

Asked by Johnston if he had a comment on the number of universities in general, Wharton said he had no fixed view on the optimum number. He noted the OFS regulated fewer institutions than had been intended when it was first set up. He said he was open-minded about the benefits of a larger number of smaller institutions.

Marketisation of universities / casualisation of academics

Johnson asked for comment on the marketisation of universities and the decline in employment standards of academics.

In response, Wharton said it was clear that the university sector was not functioning properly as a market; he said whilst he could not say every lecturer should retain a lifetime job at present the way in which the market was structured was something the OFS needed to take an interest in.

Prevent duty

Begum asked for comment on Wharton's approach to the Prevent duty in universities.

In response, Wharton said his broad view was that all students should feel welcome in HE. He said that so far he had not heard much criticism of the OFS approach to Prevent and said high compliance to the Prevent Duty was a positive.