



Accountability Hearings - Summary

House of Commons - Committee Summary - Education Select Committee

28/04/2021

27 April 2021

Witnesses :

- Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities at Department for Education

Overview

The committee examined Government response to the challenges for higher education raised by Covid-19, especially with regard to learning, job-seeking and mental health. They questioned the minister on antisemitism, race hate and Islamophobia in universities. They heard the Government's plans for widening the scope of further education and their programmes to tackle levelling up.

Compensation

The chair, Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow), opened by asking how the Government could ensure a simple compensation procedure for students who felt they had "not had a quality education over the past year".

Michelle Donelan, Minister for Universities, acknowledged that young people had "borne the brunt" of a difficult year but argued that there was not "a blanket refund across the board" because university staff had "worked their socks off" to "continue educating...young people".

She explained that there was a process in place for formal complaints, initially to the university and, if necessary, on to the OIA, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. She added that a notification could be placed on the Office for Students (OfS) website which could "trigger a review". When pressed by the chair, Donelan said she could "not guarantee" the process would "lead to a refund".

Opportunity Areas

The chair thanked Donelan and her officials for showing him the Hastings and North Yorkshire Opportunity Areas (OAs) "on a virtual basis" and asked her if she wanted OAs to continue after August 2021 when the current funding would end.

Donelan replied that an announcement would be made shortly and so she could not pre-empt that but acknowledged that the OAs already knew "the direction of travel".

The chair observed that some of the most deprived areas in the country had not been selected as OAs, losing out on funding from many other programmes, and asked how "the cake" could be divided "more fairly".

Donelan replied that her priority was to expand the help out beyond the 12 OAs, as seen with the Twinning programme and the utilisation of community groups. She assured the committee that the

Government was committed to "level up" and that deprived areas that did "not make the cut for OAs" would be "getting investment and other initiatives dedicated to them, not just from the DfE but from other Government departments".

In reply to the chair's doubts about the measures for evaluating OAs, Donelan listed the attainments over the last year and said the DfE was keeping them under review. She cited the success of the Bradford OA's programme "Glasses for Classes" where the DfE had worked with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). Donelan rejected the chair's assertion that OAs suffered from "convene-itis" and argued that their strength was in bringing together key stakeholders.

In reply to Dr Caroline Johnson (Con, Sleaford and North Hykeham), Donelan acknowledged deprivation in some rural areas and argued that OAs and many other programmes were working to ensure young people left school "with the results that can unlock the next stage of their lives".

Antisemitism in Universities

The chair raised allegations from Jewish groups that the University of Bristol (UoB) had "provided an academic with a platform to promote conspiracy theories about Jewish influence and control, using classic antisemitic tropes to characterise the state of Israel".

He said that he had written to UoB to complain that it "cares nothing for the welfare of its Jewish students", asserted that "the behaviour of the management and the vice-chancellor" was "pretty appalling" and asked Donelan to provide an update on discussions with the UoB and the OfS regarding the conduct of Professor David Miller.

Donelan agreed that antisemitism was "abhorrent in universities" and said the DfE had been working "to encourage as many as possible to sign the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition, which Bristol already had done". She added that the Government did not comment on individual cases and pointed out that an investigation was going on in Bristol.

In reply to the chair's argument that the Government could not wash their hands of this issue, Donelan assured him that this was "an area of focus" for the Government but that they would have to wait for the outcome of the investigation after which she would "speak to the vice-chancellor".

In reply to Christian Wakeford (Con, Bury South), Donelan said the Government agreed with the recommendations in the Community Security Trust (CST) report on campus anti-Semitism.

Wakeford asked what the Government proposed to do about universities who were "actively opposed to adopting the IHRA such as Oxford Brookes and Derby". Donelan replied that the DfE would "continue to urge all universities to sign up to this" and said that the Government was looking at whether it should be "potentially mandating universities to publish incidences" to "highlight whether the definition is having an impact on the ground".

Jonathan Gullis (Con, Stoke-on-Trent North) cited the refusal of various academics to sign up to the IHRA and asked Donelan why these individuals could not be sacked. Donelan explained that the Government could not sack them because they were not their employers and said that the IHRA definition was "not a legal requirement" but she agreed that certain universities did need to go further to address this concerning issue.

In reply to the chair, Donelan clarified that she had discussed the topic in general with the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) but not the specific case of UoB.

Race Hate Crime

Kim Johnson (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) observed that there had been an increase in race hate crime "particularly since the 2016 referendum" and asked how universities supported students facing anti-black racism and Islamophobia.

Donelan agreed that there was "no place for any form of racism" in universities. She highlighted the recent OfS "statement of expectations" of standards in universities which they were monitoring closely and assured the committee the DfE was working closely with them. She added that the Government did not fund universities specifically to address these issues.

Opportunity Fund

Ian Mearns (Lab, Gateshead) pointed out that despite levels of deprivation that should have qualified for inclusion in the Opportunity Areas programme, the North East of England had instead been awarded an Opportunity Fund and he asked for an assessment of its work.

Donelan outlined that £24m had been dedicated to Opportunity North East (One) particularly "to assist with progression at secondary school and beyond". She said that the DfE was "keeping everything under review" and that she would keep the committee updated.

Support for Graduates

Mearns asked what support for careers advice and guidance the Government was putting in place for graduates who faced "a challenging labour market with almost one in eight recent graduates unemployed in the third quarter of last year".

Donelan replied that this was "an area of focus" and said that the DfE was working with universities on a package of measures that they would be announcing shortly. She highlighted the current availability of the Schools Toolkit as well the £32m Government investment in the National Careers Service (NCS).

David Johnston (Con, Wantage) asked if employers should be taking into account the fact that this year's graduates had missed out on placements and course content when making their hiring decisions. Donelan replied that she understood they would be and explained that DfE had been working with businesses and the accreditation bodies to promote that message.

Degree Apprenticeships

Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich) asked what more work the Government could do to make a framework of incentives to encourage universities to do more with regards to skills through degree apprenticeships (DAs).

Donelan replied that a great deal of work had been done, including IoTs (Institutes of Technology) which were skills focused. She added that the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, due to come in in 2025, would address many of these issues by ensuring that higher education and technical education was "much more flexible" and she encouraged universities to increase the choice of DAs they were offering.

The chair highlighted the Sutton Trust report that had suggested that the pandemic had exacerbated a decline in apprenticeships but an increase in the number of higher apprenticeships and asked for more details.

Donelan said she would send the committee the most recent statistics. She agreed with the chair that it was important to work with universities to address the issue of ensuring that those from disadvantaged backgrounds were aware of the opportunities of degree apprenticeships.

Donelan would not be drawn on whether Access and Participation Plan funding should be contingent on universities offering degree apprenticeships but assured the committee that there would be more on offer across the country.

The chair put on the record that he knew Donelan was supportive of degree apprenticeships.

Grade Inflation

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked what discussions the DfE had had with the sector about the consequences for the financial position of some institutions if grade inflation expanded recruitment in "higher tariff universities" at the expense of "lower tariff universities".

Donelan stressed that the Covid-19 related grade inflation was "a completely different scenario to last year" because universities had been included in the design of the exams and would be flexible with the students. She assured the committee that the Government would continue to ensure that the "whole sector" was supported.

In reply to Begum, Donelan said that no institution was "imminently about to go into financial liquidation" and "not one single university" had accessed the Government's "restructuring regime" safety net.

Sexual Harassment

Begum highlighted the OfS' "statement of expectations on sexual harassment" and asked if this should be "a regulatory requirement tied to universities' registration conditions".

Donelan replied that there was more to be done "in this space" but she could not go into more detail. She reported that she was scheduled to meet the founder of Everyone's Invited to discuss the nature of reports published on its website. She reminded the committee that in 2015 the Government had commissioned a taskforce which had produced a Changing Cultures report and she had received their latest update.

Mearns observed that Ofsted was undertaking an urgent review of the problem of sexual harassment and asked why that was not mirrored in universities rather than waiting for a statement of expectations. Donelan reiterated that the DfE was working with the sector on this "deeply concerning" issue.

Mearns recommended "a greater sense of urgency" because the problem was being compounded by victims being kept in the dark by the universities about the progress of their cases.

Post-Qualification Admissions Model

Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) asked whether the post-qualification admissions (PQA) model would deliver on increasing the access to university of young people on free meals. She said that she had heard doubts from the Access Project (AP) that PQA did not give young people enough time to access the admissions system.

Donelan acknowledged that there were different opinions on the efficacy of the initiative and encouraged everybody to get involved with the consultation before it closed on 13 May 2021 because the Government wanted to engage with people to make sure they got this right.

Return to In-Person Teaching

Anderson asked why the decision to the return to in-person teaching at universities had been delayed so long and the chair asked why further education (FE) colleges had been allowed to start before universities.

Donelan replied that decisions had been taken on "the setting rather than the actual course". She explained that the FE courses had been able to start earlier because the majority of their students were commuters whereas university students would be forming new households which did not align with the pandemic roadmap.

She added that the Government had taken into consideration all the scientific advice and information "from the likes of SAGE, the DCMO, the CMO, Public Health England, the JBC and SPI-M".

Mental Health

Anderson observed that her university, Roehampton, had seen "a 20 per cent increase in students accessing wellbeing and mental health advice" and that she had heard from the University and Colleges Union (UCU) "about the mental health impact on staff" of the pandemic. She asked what action the Government would be taking to continue support for mental health issues for students and staff into 2022.

Donelan replied that this issue had already concerned her before the pandemic and said that the DfE had encouraged universities to transition their support services online from the start. She outlined various programmes set up by the Government to tackle the problem, such as Student Space and a mental health action group that she co-chaired with the minister responsible for children. She added that the Government had dedicated £12m, working with the OfS, to assist with the transition to higher education.

London Weighting

Anderson queried why the London weighting had been removed from the higher education teaching grant "out of the blue in February".

Donelan replied that that this was currently being consulted on with the OfS and she welcomed the committee's input to that consultation. She explained that the grant was "a top-up" to universities and London weighting only accounted for one per cent of their total income. She said the Government had set up an additional fund of £10m to assist institutions that were particularly world leading.

Marketization of Higher Education

Kim Johnson asked what the Government was doing about the increased marketization of higher education and casualization of university jobs compared to the "extortionate salaries" of vice-chancellors.

Donelan agreed that vice-chancellors' salaries were "far, far too high" but highlighted that some had taken pay cuts during the pandemic to reinvest in their universities' hardship support. She added that the Government was working on its final response to the Augar Review and were looking to publish it in line with the spending review this year.

Higher Education for Prisoners

Anderson asked what rules the Government had put in place to make student loans more flexible for prisoners and also what changes could be made to the rule that prisoners were only eligible for higher education in the last six years of their sentence.

Donelan explained that a Ministry of Justice (MoJ) review had concluded that the six-year rule should be relaxed and assured the committee she would work closely with them on this possibility.

Free Speech

Hunt cited research by Policy Exchange that had said "almost 50 per cent of right-leaning academics in non-STEM subjects self-censored their work" because of pressure and asked what the Government meant to do to ensure these academics felt comfortable to conduct their research.

Donelan agreed this was a concern not just for academics but also for students and visiting speakers and said that the Government had recently published a paper on this which had proposed creating "a champion of free speech" and establishing "a statutory tort".

Citing a 2018 OfS board paper that had found "no evidence of free speech being systematically suppressed" in universities, Kim Johnson suggested this creation of a free speech champion was just "an intensification of Tory culture wars". Donelan did not agree and insisted this was a measure to encourage free speech for all students and academics.

Kim Johnson asked Donelan to explain why it was appropriate for someone in her position to describe "decolonising the curriculum" as "a Soviet Union-style censoring of history" and asked if she would apologise for her remarks. Donelan replied that she was happy to email Johnson the podcast of her comments and defended her position.

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