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Dear Gavin

I have decided not to seek reappointment as Chair of the Office for Students when my four-year term ends at the end of March 2021. I am letting you know now so that there is ample time for you to select my successor.

It has been a privilege and honour to serve in this role. I have enjoyed every minute of it. Given the uncertain political times through which I have served, I have found myself working with three different Secretaries of State and four different universities ministers. I am grateful to you and Michelle Donelan, and to all your predecessors, for the time and consideration I have been given. I am also grateful to the numerous excellent civil servants I have worked with over that time.

The role has given me the opportunity to visit nearly 40 different universities, colleges and innovative new providers to see for myself the activity students, academic staff, researchers and university administrators are engaged in. Each visit has been inspiring; the quality of teaching, learning, research and community engagement is often truly outstanding and the sheer diversity of our institutions is a major strength.

Of course, the sector is not without its challenges but for me the overwhelming lesson of the last few years is that our higher education system is precious and wonderful. The country should be proud of it. As we build our future, it has a huge part to play economically, culturally and socially at every level, local: regional and national. Meanwhile, in the global economy, it provides us with an extraordinary comparative advantage, which will be all the more important in the post-Brexit era.

From the moment I took on the role I was convinced we needed to move rapidly to implement the new framework that the 2017 legislation had put in place. Rather than hesitate in a period of political uncertainty, I thought that we, the new OfS, should generate as much forward momentum as possible. With the outstanding leadership of Nicola Dandridge and her executive team, as well

as a strong and diverse board, we have been able, rapidly and effectively, to create an entirely new and modern regulator. We started by establishing the new regulatory framework and, through this principles-based approach to regulation, have begun to address the major challenges facing the sector. Throughout, we have actively engaged students themselves to an unprecedented degree in our working practices.

We have registered around 400 universities, colleges and other course providers, giving us the best picture of the state of the sector there has ever been. We have also turned down 25 applications and thus set a clear minimum standard for quality.

Across the sector we have advanced an agenda of dramatically improving access and participation while strengthening value for money and insisting on standards and quality.

- To improve access and participation for disadvantaged and other underrepresented students at universities and colleges, we have required registered providers to set ambitious goals for the next five years. We are monitoring their progress, assisting with the spread of successful practices and ready to intervene as necessary. If the goals that have been set are achieved, or even largely achieved, we will see the biggest advance for decades in social mobility and equality of opportunity.
- To improve the quality of teaching in higher education, the most significant development has been TEF, which has already focused the minds of university leaders on the need to prioritise and, as necessary, strengthen teaching quality. We are prepared to take the quality agenda forward vigorously in the next stage after the government's response to the Pearce Report has been made public. We are ready to address quality at both provider and subject level.
- To help improve value for money, we have engaged students, provided extensive comparative data and challenged excessive pay. As a result, we have seen vice-chancellors' pay coming under control and in many cases, especially when vacant posts are advertised, falling.
- To challenge grade inflation, we have used the transparency of published data and followed up with specific institutions as necessary. As a result, grade inflation has been slowed, halted and, in some cases, reversed for the first time for a generation. A similar approach has enabled us to tackle the misuse of unconditional offers; this too has already had a significant effect.
- To promote innovation, the pipeline we have established has enabled some promising new course providers to emerge. Progress on this agenda has been slowed by the pandemic but that is only temporary. The most striking innovation of the last few years is the huge expansion of degree apprenticeships, including among research intensive universities. In 2015-16 just 741 students started a degree apprenticeship at Level 6; in 2019-20 over 10,000 did so.

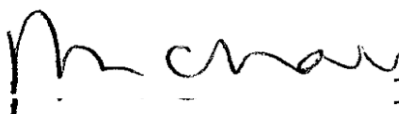
- Working with partners, we have upgraded the quality of, and access to, information about higher education for students and prospective students. These developments have enabled students to make better informed choices about what to study and where.
- Last, but not least, we have advocated freedom of speech vigorously throughout my tenure and established the precedent that the OfS will only ever intervene to extend freedom of speech, never to restrict it.

Throughout we have fostered and maintained close and effective working relationships with key partners such as UKRI and Research England.

Of course, as with every other aspect of our lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a series of challenges to higher education and to the continuing implementation of the agenda I have described. I am glad we have been able to work collaboratively with leaders of the sector and with you and your officials as we rise to those challenges. You know better than anyone that we still have plenty to do, for example, to minimise the effects of the pandemic on students from disadvantaged backgrounds or to assist institutions which may face significant financial challenges. Through to the end of my tenure I look forward to working with you and colleagues to ensure the higher education sector emerges from the pandemic in the best shape possible.

Indeed, I hope that by the time I complete my term next year, the higher education sector will be well on the road to recovery and we will be in a position to take forward the agenda the OfS has set with vigour and optimism, ideally in parallel with progress on further education and apprenticeships. As I have said repeatedly over the last few years, “Golden ages don’t have to be in the past.”

With best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M Barber'.

Sir Michael Barber

Chair

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