

Quality and opportunity: priorities of the higher education regulator

Chair of the Office for Students, Lord Wharton's speech to the UUK Spring members' meeting, 14 May 2021

Thank you for inviting me today and for giving me the opportunity to speak to your members. I have now been in the role of Chair of the Office for Students for six weeks, and already I have been able to meet a wide range of people and groups from across the sector. One of the few advantages of these very strange times is that virtual events allow me to meet many more people than would be possible if I were physically travelling around the country.

These early meetings have reinforced my view that we have a world class higher education system. English universities and colleges are respected and admired around the globe. That, combined with a cohort of students who are dedicated to their studies and understand the opportunities that come from a degree, means that the sector is well placed to emerge from an enormously difficult year in good shape.

This has, of course, been a year like no other. Students and staff have had to adapt quickly to online learning and – like all of us – have experienced necessary but nonetheless difficult restrictions on everyday life. Students have shown enormous resilience and have overwhelmingly complied with lockdown rules. It's important to note that – by and large – universities and other higher education providers have stepped up to the mark and met both their academic and pastoral responsibilities. It is my sincere hope that we can conclude this academic year and start the new term in September with optimism, as we emerge slowly from the pandemic.

I wanted to talk with you today about four key principles for me as I embark on the role. The first is that nobody with the talent to benefit from higher education should find that their background is a barrier to their success. Second, that higher education students from all backgrounds and on all courses should expect a high quality experience, and that high academic standards must be maintained. Third, that universities must continue to take urgent steps to tackle harassment on campus. And finally, that we should, as an efficient and effective regulator, take steps to reduce unnecessary regulatory burden wherever we can.

Everyone with the talent to benefit from a degree should have the opportunity to get to university, whatever their background. Accelerating progress on access must be a key element of the government's levelling up agenda. I know from my experience as an MP in the North East that too many people are still locked out of higher education. Put simply, these are people who don't think university is for them, even though they might have the potential and ability to thrive. The problem is not one of low aspirations – everyone wants to get on in life, and every parent wants to see their children succeed. But if nobody in your family and few in your community have made it to university, it is not surprising that talented pupils can lack the information and guidance to be able to make the choice to go to university.

This needs to change if we are to truly level-up the country. We know that talent is spread across the country but opportunity is not. Every community should be a place first of high aspirations which in turn lead to high expectations that can then be converted into high attainment. Universities, working with schools, have a crucial role to play here - they need to continue to reach out – especially to those towns and coastal communities where people feel forgotten – and to show people there that university is for them too. By casting their nets wide, searching for talent where opportunity may be in short supply, universities have the power to transform lives. And universities have a critical role in developing that talent also, doing the hard graft with schools and pupils to drive up attainment and achievement from an early age.

The access and participation plans you have agreed with the OfS will – if targets are met – deliver generational change for social mobility in England. But a plan is only one step. Now it is time to deliver so that many more people can expect and enjoy opportunities not just to access university, but to succeed when they get there.

Let me be clear though. Broadening access to university cannot be done by lowering standards. I do not accept the argument that levelling up can involve any reduction in the academic excellence and rigour of which our higher education sector is rightly proud. It is incumbent on our universities to play their part in raising standards and attainment both at the point of access and throughout the higher education experience.

This brings me to my second theme.

When students do begin their degrees, they are right to expect that they will receive high quality teaching and a springboard to a good career. Education for its own sake is to be commended and protected, but in doing so we should recognise that – for most students – securing a rewarding career is one of the most important factors in deciding what, where and how to study. While most higher education teaching in England is good or excellent, good quality is not universal. Nobody embarks on a degree expecting to drop out, or to find themselves no better off months – or even years – after they graduate. Courses with high drop out rates and low progression to professional employment let students down, and we shouldn't be reticent in saying so, or taking action. So my message today is simple. Most universities and other higher education providers offer good quality provision. Many will comfortably out-perform any numerical baselines we set – and will see regulatory burden fall as a result. But, where standards slip we stand ready to intervene. We will set out our next steps on quality shortly, sharpening our regulatory tools as necessary to address these issues and help ensure that students can count on good quality higher education.

I also wanted to touch on the importance of students being safe and feeling safe while they are on campus. Any form of unlawful harassment must be tackled robustly, with universities not shirking difficult steps to make sure that students are protected. One straightforward action to take is for all universities to sign up to the IHRA definition of antisemitism. The definition is important in helping us all to interpret and understand antisemitism and I strongly urge any university that hasn't signed up to do so without delay. Those universities that have signed up must – of course – continue to be alert to antisemitic incidents and have clear measures in place to ensure that Jewish students are free to study and enjoy university life without fear of harassment.

This is one of the reasons why I was so pleased to see the OfS recently publish its statement of expectations in relation to harassment and sexual misconduct. We have set out clearly the minimum expectations that any student should have about the systems and processes that their university or college should have in place to prevent and, where necessary, respond to incidents of unlawful harassment or sexual misconduct. I know that this statement of expectations is the result of extensive consultation and urge you all to ensure that your universities comply with these expectations, as a minimum. We have seen some shocking testimony from students on the Everyone's Invited website. It is clear that many students continue to experience harassment and assault on and around campus. This is wholly unacceptable, and so now – ahead of the new academic year – is the time to take action. We will be carefully considering the response of the sector and listening to students' views, before looking into options for connecting the statement directly to our conditions of registration.

Before I draw my remarks to a close I wanted to briefly cover the issue of regulatory burden that some vice chancellors have, quite rightly, raised with me during my first weeks as OfS chair. Reducing unnecessary burden will be a priority for me as chair of the OfS. We need to get the

balance right between ensuring students and taxpayers enjoy the benefits of regulation without universities experiencing an overly bureaucratic process that detracts from their core purpose – delivering excellent teaching and research. I am sure there is more we can do to tackle this issue and I am delighted to announce that, as a first step, we will publish next week the details of a new key performance measure that will set out transparently whether our work is reducing or increasing reducing regulatory burden. This will be an important step that will enable us to demonstrate - and be held to account for - the outcomes of our work in this area.

I hope you have already seen early signs of our intentions in our decision to suspend random sampling, reduce the use of enhanced monitoring, and increase the length of access and participation plans from one year to five. I am also keen that we think carefully about our communications with and requirements of universities. We need to strike the right balance between being clear and specific to ensure we have the right information we need to regulate effectively, while operating a principles-based regulatory system which allows for autonomy and diversity in the sector. I will want to hear from you where we are getting this right as well as where we could do better. We are serious about the need to tackle any needless bureaucracy and to ensure that our regulation is proportionate, truly risk-based and fair.

Before I finish, I would like to return to my comments right at the start of this session. I am six weeks into this role and gathering helpful information in all my engagements with the higher education sector so far. So with that in mind, thank you again for inviting me to speak with you today and I will look forward to discussing any questions or comments you may have.