



House of Commons

Business, Innovation and Skills
Committee

Student Admissions and the Office for Fair Access

Oral and written evidence

Tuesday 19 March 2013

*Mary Curnock Cook, Chief Executive, UCAS and
Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access to
Higher Education*

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Business, Innovation and Skills Committee

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Oral evidence

Taken before the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee

on Tuesday 19 March 2013

Members present:

Mr Adrian Bailey (Chair)

Paul Blomfield
Katy Clark
Julie Elliott
Rebecca Harris

Ann McKechin
Mr Robin Walker
Nadhim Zahawi

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Mary Curnock Cook**, Chief Executive, UCAS, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning. Thank you for agreeing to address the Committee. We are slightly depleted. We have a Bill Committee that has taken some Members; illness has taken at least one other, so we will handle the questions ourselves. Would you introduce yourself for voice transcription purposes?

Mary Curnock Cook: Yes. I am Mary Curnock Cook, the Chief Executive of UCAS, the University and Colleges Admissions Service.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. I will start with a fairly general question. The information on UCAS says that you provide application services, information and course details for full-time undergraduate, postgraduate and secondary education providers and learners. Can you give us some sort of flavour of the advice that you offer prospective students?

Mary Curnock Cook: Certainly the universal service that we offer is for full-time undergraduate admissions to higher education in the United Kingdom, where there is a very high percentage of universities and colleges who participate in the scheme. As for postgraduate and secondary education, those are much smaller schemes and they are not adopted universally. We have a very comprehensive website, ucas.com, which aims to provide anyone who is interested in progressing to higher education with all the information they need in order to make the right choices, for the right reasons, and with the right outcomes.

Q3 Chair: Given that you have potential applicants from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of understanding of the undergraduate experience, do you tailor any of your advice to meet differing levels of comprehension, or differing levels of enthusiasm for a university career?

Mary Curnock Cook: The first thing to say is that we aim to give information rather than advice; it is not for us to advise an individual applicant about what is the right thing for them to do. What we have done is ensure that the information is available from a very wide range of channels. There is obviously printed material on the website itself. We have video content now, so that you can watch a short film about any aspect of the course. We have a full social media team

these days, so we are answering and picking up a lot of questions that people have on Twitter and Facebook, and so on. We aim to communicate with all types of applicants in many of the modern ways that they like to receive information these days.

Q4 Chair: What services do you provide for postgraduate and part-time students?

Mary Curnock Cook: For postgraduate we have a limited scheme, which is used by about 20 institutions; it is basically a service that we offer that they can choose to use. It is quite similar to the main scheme, in that applicants can apply through UCAS and we transmit that information on to the institutions to make their decisions.

Currently we do not offer any services for part-time, but we are in conversation with some of the biggest part-time providers to ensure that we can put information about part-time opportunities on our website, because UCAS is known as the place you go to for information. We are also talking to part-time providers about whether there is a way that UCAS could start to collect data, so we have the sort of data that we have for full-time undergraduates available also for part-time.

Q5 Chair: You partly anticipated my next question, which was: do you have any data on them? I gather you have relatively little.

Mary Curnock Cook: No, we do not.

Q6 Chair: Given the drop in part-time student applications, do you think there is any potential for what you do to help increase the numbers?

Mary Curnock Cook: I would like to think so. Part-time admissions is a very different world from full-time admissions, and I think most providers recognise that they would not need to go through a full UCAS experience, as we offer for full-time undergraduates. Part-time applicants tend to be much more local to their institution, so they perhaps do not see the need to go through a remote system. The important things that we could offer are: firstly, information on our website, which is known as a source of authoritative information about higher education; and secondly, to work with the sector to see if we can collect data, so that we can see much

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more clearly who is applying for part-time, and then improve the communications for those who are likely to be receptive to it.

Q7 Chair: Can I move on to your *End of Cycle Report 2012*. You said the number of applicants dropped by 6.6%. How would you summarise the reasons for that fall?

Mary Curnock Cook: It is fair to say that demand was stalled a bit while people considered their options for higher education in the new tuition fee regime. I should also say that there is a very significant population fall at the moment in the number of 18-year-olds in the population who might be applying for higher education; that has been in decline since 2009. We estimate that there are about 60,000 fewer 18-year-olds in the population today than there were in 2009, so every year the sector is facing a decline of several percentage points in the population.

Undoubtedly that is a factor in demand issues for higher education currently, and that is why we look at application rates and entry rates in our report, so that we take into account the population changes. Over the years those population changes affect the number of 19-year-olds, which is a significant number of applicants, 20-year-olds and 21-year-olds. Those young 20-year-olds are also a fairly big cohort of applicants for us, so those population declines will be feeding through into older age groups. The decline is reckoned to bottom out in 2020, so it is a significant headwind in the next few years.

Q8 Chair: That is interesting. Could I just explore this population impact? I am not sure if I heard you correctly; did you say there were 60,000 fewer 18-year-olds overall?

Mary Curnock Cook: Overall, since 2009, when the demographic decline started, and that decline goes on a few percentage points per year until about 2020.

Q9 Chair: Yes. Of that proportion, what would you reasonably expect the numbers going to university to be?

Mary Curnock Cook: When we look at application rates, we correct for the population. Last year, if everything had continued on trend, we would have expected a one-percentage-point increase in the application rate of 18-year-olds; we actually had a one-percentage-point drop in the application rate for 18-year olds. In other words, there was a two-percentage-point drop in what the expected demand might have been.

Q10 Chair: Can I get it clear? The applicants dropped by 6.6% but, in effect, the pro rata rate has only dropped by 2 percentage points.

Mary Curnock Cook: Yes, but to caveat that, I am talking specifically about the 18-year-old cohort, which is a nice clean statistical group that we can be quite accurate about.

Q11 Chair: Did you look specifically at the impact of the rise in student loans?

Mary Curnock Cook: It is difficult to peg a specific issue to a specific effect. We did look at whether there was any evidence of applicant behaviour relating to the tuition fee of particular courses. We retro-fitted the fees back in time, so that we could compare the courses that were charging £6,000 or £9,000 in 2012 with similar courses back through time. We did not see any marked effect of applications away from more expensive fees. Having said that, our data show that roughly half of all courses are at the very highest level of the fee rates, so it is quite difficult to expect that there would be any big trends within that.

Q12 Chair: You have mentioned the pattern of applications. Have you any evidence on the overall level?

Mary Curnock Cook: It is fair to say that in 2012 there was a drop in demand, which could be partially attributed to the higher tuition fees. One of the interesting things that we have seen in 2013, this second cycle of the higher fee regime, is that we have got quite a significant increase in the number of 19-year-olds applying. When I look at the data, what I see is that the more advantaged groups seemingly were slightly more put off proportionately than the more disadvantaged groups, who held up quite well in 2012.

That is a population of young people who perhaps have always expected that they would progress to higher education; for them it was as night follows day, university would follow A-Levels, or whatever they were doing in sixth form. It was that population who, perhaps in a positive way, took a more considered decision about going to higher education. Therefore, we have seen more of them coming back as 19-year-olds in the 2013 cycle, so they have taken a pause to think about making not only an investment of three years of their life, but also quite a significant financial investment.

Q13 Chair: Or doing a gap year?

Mary Curnock Cook: Deferring for a year can mean many different things for many different people; it could mean getting a job, or it could mean going abroad. That opportunity to defer for a year is definitely more prevalent in more affluent groups. I do not think that is always an affordable decision for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Q14 Paul Blomfield: Following on on the 2012 report, you also talk about the disruption of deferral patterns, which led to a decrease of almost 54,000 starting studies last year. What was the disruption, and why did it happen?

Mary Curnock Cook: In each year, we get applications to enter university in that year or, in some cases, to enter in the following year; that is what we mean by a deferral by one year. In 2011, although the data did not show a huge rush to apply as some would perhaps have posited, what we did see was perhaps a rush to enter. What happened in 2011 was the number of people who we would normally have expected to defer their entry until 2012 fell off a cliff.

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What that meant for 2012 entry was that there were not those prebooked places from the previous cycle already in the bag. That is why our data show that, while the acceptances within the UCAS cycle were down about 27,000 in 2012, when you look at it for a year of entry, they were down over 50,000; that is accounted for largely by that big drop-off of deferrals from the previous year. Also, in 2012 the deferral rate went back to normal, so they did not have the prebooked places from the previous year. They also had a recovery of the post booking into 2013, and that is what created that higher number of the decline in the number of entries.

Q15 Mr Walker: I am interested in this point that the entry rate to higher tariff institutions increased, and particularly markedly among the more disadvantaged groups. You have talked a little bit about that already. It is counterintuitive, but do you think it means that the more disadvantaged groups are less put off by the higher fees?

Mary Curnock Cook: I really believe that in more affluent groups, who perhaps come from families that have experienced higher education themselves, there is a normal expectation of progression to higher education that is much higher. If you come from a disadvantaged community where none of your family, your friends or anyone that you have ever spoken to has experienced higher education, it is a very determined decision that a young person makes, probably quite early in their school career, that they want to and feel able to reach for something different. Those decisions are probably made much earlier in their education—that they can reach for something higher—so they are on a very determined path.

The data from last year, and the early data for 2013, tell me that those from disadvantaged groups are on a very determined path and have been less put off, if you like, than the more advantaged groups. Having said that, there is still a very significant gap in participation rates between the more advantaged and the least advantaged. I do not think we should kid ourselves that there is not still a significant issue there.

Q16 Mr Walker: Are there any statistics or figures as to what that gap is and how far that gap has closed?

Mary Curnock Cook: There are; since 2004 the application rate for disadvantaged 18-year-olds is 80% higher. At 2012 the entry rate for disadvantaged 18-year-olds was at an all-time high of 15%. If we look at higher tariff institutions, by which I mean more selective institutions needing higher qualifications to get in, although the entry rate for disadvantaged groups for higher tariff institutions grew by 10% in 2012, and reached an all-time high, it was still only 2.5%. For higher tariff institutions, for more selective institutions, advantaged young people are eight times more likely to enter than disadvantaged, so it is a very significant gap.

However, the gap is closing over a period of time; slowly but surely the gap is closing. I am very worried about the gap between males and females, which continues to get worse, to the extent that we are beginning to look at men as looking more like the

disadvantaged group and women looking more like the advantaged group, in terms of the data.

Mr Walker: We will come back to that in a minute.

Mary Curnock Cook: Sorry.

Q17 Mr Walker: The other interesting statistic is the percentage fall in acceptances for 2012/13 increases as you go down the tariff level from high to low. Why do you think the lower tariff universities were more affected?

Mary Curnock Cook: It is a much bigger group, so it is a much higher proportion of the total entry. If you look at participation rates by the level of qualification that people have, over 90% of those who have got very high A-Levels, As and A*, will always progress into higher education. As you come down the scale of levels of qualification, those entry rates drop off, and at the lower end you will have young people who are making decisions: maybe applying to higher education, applying for an apprenticeship, and applying for jobs all at the same time.

Q18 Mr Walker: You also saw quite big regional variations or gaps between the different nations: England, Wales and Northern Ireland falling while Scotland continued to rise. Did you look into the detail of why that was happening?

Mary Curnock Cook: There is a huge complexity about that, because there are all sorts of interesting data about the flows between various countries. It is fair to say that the declines in entry were experienced more where the tuition fees had gone up. Of course, in each country there are all sorts of different issues about populations and so on and, of course, they are much smaller populations than the English population, so it is quite difficult.

Q19 Mr Walker: The Welsh example looks quite counterintuitive, in that a larger number of the Welsh students are coming to study in England.

Mary Curnock Cook: I hope I have got this right, but in Wales the tuition-fee level was kept at the old £3,000-and-something rate, and the Welsh Government also agreed to subsidise Welsh students who wanted to go to an English institution that was charging more. Welsh students still only had to take the loan out for the £3,000, or whatever it was, so there was no disincentive. So you saw an increase in that cross-border flow.

Q20 Paul Blomfield: I wanted to ask whether you keep any figures that would enable us to match advantaged and disadvantaged groups by regional applications. Anecdotally one gets a sense that an impact of the change in the funding regime is that those from more disadvantaged groups are narrowing their choices by deciding to be commuter students to their local university. Do you keep any numbers that would enable us to see whether or not that was the case?

Mary Curnock Cook: We do, actually. In our demand report last year we looked at the things that people were expecting to happen, so we obviously looked at disadvantaged groups, but we also looked at whether people might choose to apply much nearer home, so

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that they could live at home and reduce their costs. Our analysis did not show that there was any increase in that. There has always been about 45% who choose to study within 25 miles of home, and it is about 60% who choose to study within 50 miles of home, so higher education has always been proportionately quite local.

We did not see that effect, which everyone might have expected. Interestingly, in our survey work, which is obviously people answering questions on the spot, respondents said to us that they might consider studying nearer home, but we have not seen that effect in the data as yet.

Q21 Mr Walker: The 2013 January deadline report showed figures beginning to improve year on year. Do you have any particular reasons for that? Do you think that shows there were one-offs in 2012 that will not be repeated?

Mary Curnock Cook: There are a couple of things to say. It is quite a fragile recovery; it was only a few percentage points up. We had a large proportion of the applications in by 15 January, so most of the young applicants, about 97%, will have applied by then. We have still got a few months to go through the cycle. As I mentioned earlier, there has been quite a significant increase in the number of 19-year-olds applying in 2013; it was about 10% up on the 15 January data. That has had a positive impact on the picture in 2013.

Q22 Mr Walker: Is that likely to be larger than normal, given what you were saying about 2012 and the introduction of fees?

Mary Curnock Cook: No, it feels as if everything has gone back to normal. I do not think we have recovered the losses of 2012, but all the growth rates and measures that we look at proportionately seem to be back on the normal trend. There was a dip that has not so far been fully recovered, but then we are back on the same sorts of trajectories as before. It is very early days, and we are only talking about applications currently, and what happens in terms of entry rate in the summer will give us a much clearer picture of what is really happening.

Q23 Rebecca Harris: Back to the issue of applications from disadvantaged areas going up, do you think that reflects that there is now less fear of student debt and fees?

Mary Curnock Cook: I do like to think that the sector collectively, and UCAS was very active itself, did a pretty good job in getting messages across to potential applicants that they did not have to pay anything up front, and that they would only have to pay back their loans once they were deriving the benefit by earning at a rate over the £21,000 threshold. Young people are quite savvy about these things; there do not appear to be a lot of problems with the loan repayment scheme. People do understand that, so I do not think that has been a huge impact. We have been less successful as a sector in getting that information across to parttime applicants.

Q24 Rebecca Harris: How clear is the data about increasing applicants from disadvantaged areas? How confident can we be that they are from disadvantaged groups, as opposed to better off applicants from those areas?

Mary Curnock Cook: In our analysis we use postcode data, which uses the local participation rate in higher education as an indicator, but we have mapped that against some other economic indicators, for example the household income indicators. We are pretty confident that it gives a true picture of what is happening. Obviously within that there will be individuals who fall outside the stereotype that our data assumes.

Q25 Rebecca Harris: I was going to ask you about the growing gap between 18-year-old male and female applicants, and what you think is going on there. Why do you think that is happening?

Mary Curnock Cook: I am very worried about this, as I have said on a number of occasions. It is fair to say that right through Key Stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 females are outperforming males in primary and secondary education. Of course, that is feeding through to participation in higher education, as well. It is a very deep-seated issue, and it is not something that the higher education sector on its own can fix. It requires more focus across all of education provision to look at why boys are underperforming.

Incidentally it is not just us; this is a phenomenon seen in many different economies. Nevertheless, it appears to be getting worse, and it is really important that there is a focus on this issue across the education system.

Q26 Rebecca Harris: Related to that, this Committee has been doing an Inquiry into women in the workplace, and we have had a lot of evidence about the differential choices in courses as well. Have you looked much at the difference in terms of women and the courses they are applying for? We hear a lot of evidence that women may be going to university, but they are not going into STEM subjects and that kind of thing.

Mary Curnock Cook: I have done some work on that. Roughly speaking, females are twice as likely to take arts and humanities subjects, and males are twice as likely to take STEM subjects: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Having said that, I do think it is a mistake to think that there is a very direct causal relationship between some degree courses and career benefit, if you like. Certainly one of the big four accountancy firms will take more than 50% of its graduate accountancy intake from people with general degree backgrounds, rather than accountancy and business. There is a bigger issue there; it is not quite such a direct relationship.

Q27 Rebecca Harris: Thank you. Can you give us evidence why you think it is that older students seem to apply later in the year? Is there a reason for that?

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Mary Curnock Cook: Yes. Younger students, 18-year-olds anyway, are still in school or college when they apply, and most schools and colleges will set out on a UCAS drive, where they explain the UCAS system, they get their kids to get their applications together, they have got a machine going that makes sure the references are provided, and they drive them towards the deadline. Once you are out of that system and you are no longer applying through a school or a centre, then you are on your own. If you are into your 20s and 30s, the natural rhythms of the academic year start to leave you behind a bit, and perhaps people are just making their decisions later in the year; they realise that they can apply even though they have missed a particular deadline, and many of them do. We get about 100,000 applications after the January deadline in a typical year.

Q28 Chair: Just before I move on to Paul, I went to a presentation by the Institute of Fiscal Studies yesterday, and one of the comments that was made was that the job market is much tougher for people under 35, and particularly the younger you go within the jobs market, than for middle aged and even older people. On the surface that might be quite a surprising observation. I appreciate it is probably beyond your immediate research remit, but on the basis of the evidence that you have, have you got a feel for the fact that young people may be applying to go to university if only to defer, if you like, the experience of getting into the job market?

Mary Curnock Cook: I do not think I have got any direct evidence of that, but I could see that that might be a train of thought. It is really important that we get across to young people that a degree is for life, and we hope very much that the economic circumstances today, and the problems with the young employment rate, will be temporary. It is very clear; there is plenty of evidence to show that those with a degree are less likely to be unemployed, even in difficult economic times and, indeed, when the economy hopefully improves, they will reap the benefits over their entire career.

Q29 Paul Blomfield: Can I ask one further question about the January report? As I understand it, in previous years you have published application figures by institution. This year you took the decision not to do that. Why?

Mary Curnock Cook: We had very good reasons not to. Whichever way you look at what happened in 2012, there was significant perturbation in the higher education sector. A lot of institutions had declines in the number of enrolments in 2012, and there was a change in the dynamic; in previous cycles we have seen applicants scrambling for places, and in 2012 it felt like a bit of a switch—that places were looking for applicants. There was a definite change in the market dynamic.

When we publish data we need to put a slide rule over whether publishing that data is likely to have an

impact on either applicant behaviour or universities' behaviour. In this case, we felt that publishing the institutional level data about whether they were up or down at the 15 January deadline was likely to be "strategically useful information for institutions". In other words, they might look at what a close competitor's numbers were like and alter their own offer-making strategy or recruitment strategy. We were cognisant of competition law in that respect.

As far as applicants go, I do not think applicants probably look at data at quite that level anyway, but data at an institutional level will mask all sorts of ups and downs at a course level, which is likely to be the area of interest for an applicant.

Q30 Paul Blomfield: The Government has placed great emphasis on transparency, and many of us want to understand what is happening as a result of the big changes in the funding regime. Do you not think that the argument for transparency and understanding behaviour might have outweighed the reasons that led you to hold back from publishing that data?

Mary Curnock Cook: There is a competition law, and part of the analysis that we did was that something like 40% of institutions had a 20% or greater overlap with one single other institution, and we felt, given that amount of close competition between individual institutions, that this information would constitute strategically useful information and, therefore, we should not publish it while the cycle is still live. We will publish it at the end of the cycle, but not during the live cycle.

Q31 Paul Blomfield: I wonder if I can move on to talk about part-time students, which you touched on?

Mary Curnock Cook: Which I am not very good at, but go on, yes.

Paul Blomfield: I appreciate that, but obviously it is an area of concern. Numbers starting courses in September last year were down 30%. It is seen as a significant entry route for underrepresented groups. What do you think is causing the dramatic decline?

Mary Curnock Cook: I hesitate to answer without evidence, but some of the things that need looking at are whether some of these part-time applicants are, or have been in the past, those who have already got a first degree and are looking to do something different, either for career or personal reasons. That, of course, would make them ineligible for the loan. It would be helpful to get a better understanding from those who might be expected to apply for part-time study of what the drivers are that would make them interested in studying, and what barriers are in the way.

It is a difficult population to reach, because they are not neatly in secondary schools. If they have not already applied, we cannot ask them those questions. I do not really have solid evidence. My eldest daughter is in part-time higher education, so she was a positive number last year.

Q32 Paul Blomfield: Do you think there is a case for UCAS having a wider role in helping us to understand the behaviour of part-time students?

Mary Curnock Cook: As I touched on earlier, UCAS is very keen to work with the higher education sector,

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and particularly some of the larger providers of part-time higher education, to make sure that there is a place where they could get all of the information they need. We already have the methods in place to share data with higher education institutions, but we could look at starting to collect the data, so we could write an End of Cycle report on part-time as well as on fulltime. We just do not have that data set in the sector, except through the Higher Education Statistics Agency when, of course, it comes through a bit later.

Paul Blomfield: Thank you.

Q33 Chair: Just before we finish, and I appreciate you probably do not have any hard data on this, when the increase in the tuition fees was announced, the debate centred on the potential levels of student debt. There was huge concern that the focus on this would deter wouldbe students from applying to universities. Do you feel that that debate has moved on from there, and that the improvement in applications from 18yearolds has followed this?

Mary Curnock Cook: Yes, and I would like to make the point that we still had over 650,000 applicants in 2012, and there were still over 450,000 starts. This is still a very vibrant sector, but I have always thought very strongly that, in deciding to participate in higher education, people need to look at whether they personally will benefit from that. There are benefits in a wide range of areas: economic benefits, but also significant personal and societal benefits.

If there were an upside to the higher tuition fees, this pause for thought for some of those who might have just progressed without adequate consideration into higher education has perhaps been a positive outcome. I am not sure I have really answered your question, Chair.

Chair: I am not sure how answerable it is, but I was interested in your views on this. We have had some latecomers. Are there any questions that you would like to ask before we close this session?

Q34 Mr Walker: Now that we have the Prime Minister saying that either going to university or doing an apprenticeship should be the new normal, and now that you can access degree-level qualifications through the apprenticeship route, do you think that puts a competitive pressure on the university system? Do you think that might have an effect on applications?

Mary Curnock Cook: It probably does. I have been watching the apprenticeship completion rates at level three, the 16- to 18-year-old level, and last year there were about 70,000 completions, but that has been going up by 10,000 completions a year. There is no doubt in my mind that this is a group of people who are capable of studying at that level and who choose to take the apprenticeship route, whereas potentially the biggest option might have been to progress into higher education, and there is a lot of vocational education available in higher education.

I do not think it is a helpful debate to say that they are in competition with each other. It is wonderful for young people to have real choices to learn in a way that suits their particular aptitudes and interests. I do not see it as a competition issue. Nevertheless, it is

another thing that potentially might depress demand for higher education.

Q35 Chair: Before I bring in Paul with a further supplementary, historically the number of students going via the apprenticeship route has been pretty low.

Mary Curnock Cook: Into higher education?

Chair: Yes, into higher education. Do you feel, on the basis of the evidence that you have, that maybe the new tuition-fees regime has, shall we say, incentivised businesses and students to look at this as a route to higher education?

Mary Curnock Cook: I do not have any evidence at all for that. We have done quite a lot within our system to make sure that we can help those who want to progress from apprenticeship to higher education. I feel quite strongly that, when somebody makes the decision to pursue an apprenticeship, it is because they have chosen a work-based learning route; probably then applying for higher education, in a sense, represents a change of direction. I do not think it is right to suggest that it is a desirable progression route; we should facilitate progression where people do have a change of mind, for whatever reason, but it is a very different decision to take the work-based learning route.

Q36 Chair: It is a change of approach, rather than a preplanned process?

Mary Curnock Cook: Yes. That does not mean that we should not facilitate and ensure that it is supported.

Q37 Paul Blomfield: Yes. This is, again, on the publication of data. I understand that after each application deadline, you have published data broken down by gender and age, but not by ethnicity. Why not include that at each point of the deadline? I know you have published some information on ethnicity. Don't you think there might be some advantage in doing that?

Mary Curnock Cook: Every month we publish the uptodate numbers—the headline numbers. In our *End of Cycle Report*, you will have seen that while there were tables in the back of the report looking at ethnicity, we did not look at application rates or entry rates for those with ethnic background. The reason for this is that it is very important to be able to identify the population in order to make sense of the data; as we said with the 18yearolds, we can control the population and look at what the trends are within that population.

That is much more difficult to do for BME populations, and to get accurate data about the size of the cohort, who could have applied, or could have entered higher education, not least because it is still a voluntary disclosure on our application form, so there is still a percentage of folk who choose not to answer the question about ethnicity on our form. While we can publish the raw tables that are in our report, it is not an area where we feel we can be statistically very accurate.

Q38 Paul Blomfield: You do not think there might be some advantage in mapping behaviour at different points in the process?

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Mary Curnock Cook: Yes, we are doing some work. Now we have got the UCAS data linked back to the national pupil database, and that will give us some new opportunities to look at different populations. Similarly the mature populations are very difficult to analyse for the same reason; you have got immigration and people changing their residence, and

so on. We will get better at that, but currently we cannot provide accurate enough analysis to make it reliable to publish.

Chair: Thanks very much. For once, we have finished spot on time. Thank you Mary; that was very helpful indeed. We will now welcome Professor Ebdon for his session.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Professor Les Ebdon**, Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, gave evidence.

Q39 Chair: Good morning and thank you, Professor Ebdon, for coming to speak to us today. We indicated that we would want to speak to you again about how your role is developing. Of course, we wanted to examine the impact of the 2012/13 intake and the recruits for this forthcoming academic year. Before we start the questioning, could you introduce yourself for voice transcription purposes?

Professor Ebdon: Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access to Higher Education.

Q40 Chair: Thank you. Again, some general questions to start with. You have been in post since September. What have your priorities been since taking that post?

Professor Ebdon: I have obviously had a priority to get out and about in the sector. I have visited some 24 universities. I have had meetings with some 63 stakeholder groups, and delivered over 20 presentations to sector conferences. We have issued our guidance for access agreements for 2014–15; those seem to have been well received by the universities, and we expect in the next few days to begin to receive the access agreements that people are proposing. We have been working, together with HEFCE, on the development of a National Strategy for Access and Student Success, at the request of the Secretary of State and the Minister. We were able to present an interim report, which was published by the Department last week. We will be submitting the National Strategy in September to Government.

We have been able to demonstrate to institutions that we will be a firm but reasonable regulator; they have understood the challenge that the sector faces, and the continuity with previous policies. We can reflect on a year where we thought there might be significant damage to access and widening participation because of the change in student funding regulations. That has not come about; in fact, there has been a slight increase in participation by fulltime students from the most disadvantaged groups, in contrast to a decline of those who are most advantaged. In a sense there has been some catching up, although the scale of the challenge remains a very large one.

We also have to reflect on the fact that OFFA now has some responsibility for parttime students, and the situation with regard to parttimers is not as encouraging. Indeed, there seem to be challenges with regard to mature students. Both of those groups are of particular interest, because they contain a larger number of non-traditional students with different

backgrounds from the standard student, if I can use that expression.

Q41 Chair: You spoke about the anticipation, or potential anticipation, of damage to access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Do you feel that the work that you have done so far has mitigated this? Indeed, shall we say, on the basis of evidence so far, the opposite is true?

Professor Ebdon: One swallow does not make a summer. There were a whole series of different things going on last summer. Of course, I would like to claim that the work that OFFA is doing has made a difference, and I believe to some extent it has. Institutions would like to claim that the sustained work that they have been doing over a number of years, particularly the outreach work that they are doing with schools and colleges, is beginning to bear fruit, and that has had an impact.

There are other factors that one must be honest about; there were obviously a significant number of students who did not defer entry in the previous year. Large numbers of students, principally from the higher socioeconomic groups, do defer entry to university, to take a gap year, for one reason or another, and that number reduced in 2011. There were fewer deferred entries in 2012, and that will have distorted some of the figures, because that is not evenly spread across the groups.

There is also the fact the maintenance grant went up for the poorest students; there is the size of bursaries and scholarships; and there was the introduction of the National Scholarship Programme. A number of favourable changes for students from low income groups seem to have acted as an encouragement to them, and all of those factors are in the mix.

Q42 Chair: To a certain extent, the students applying, both in 2012 and in 2013, will have entered post16 education in anticipation of going to university. The cohort that will be going into post16 education will have gone in in the knowledge of this increase in tuition fees. Have you detected any diminution of enthusiasm for going to university from the cohort that will be going to take A-Levels and potentially go into FE now?

Professor Ebdon: I should also add that, as well as that, we have seen the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, which probably is a significant factor for post-16 students.

I was talking to a large group of teachers at the Association of School and College Leaders

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conference on Friday. They were citing anecdotal evidence that students were more reluctant to proceed, because of the changes in funding, and that we should not take, as you pointed out, 2012 and 2013 as indicative of what might happen in 2014.

The statistics do not entirely bear that out; there has not been a marked drop in the numbers of students progressing. It is important for universities to be out there and to continue to stress the advantages of university, not only the advantages in economic terms but the cultural advantages—the transformational aspect of university.

Q43 Chair: We will be coming on to that in a moment. Can I just conclude my questioning? Your website sets out three core aims. Can you give a brief overview of how they reflect your responsibilities and any limitations there are on your activities?

Professor Ebdon: Our primary purpose is to safeguard access to higher education for students from underrepresented groups, and those underrepresented groups may be those by socioeconomic class, by income, or by a low participation neighbourhood. We are also concerned with underrepresented groups from some of the groups with protected characteristics. Many ethnic minority groups participate very strongly in higher education, but some groups are still underrepresented; the classic examples are Afro-Caribbean males and Bangladeshi females.

We are concerned about youngsters leaving care. Only about 7% of care leavers enter higher education compared with the 43% that is the norm in the rest of the population. When they do enter higher education, they face challenges—during vacations, for example, during times of distress—other students do not have. That is an area that we have been particularly active in.

The final area I would want to mention would be students with a disability; again, the numbers of students declaring a disability in higher education has gone up in recent years, but there are still approximately half the number of students who claim Disabled Students' Allowance that you would expect compared with the percentage of people who declare a disability in the general population.

Q44 Chair: What are you doing about it?

Professor Ebdon: The way we work is that institutions who want to charge above the basic fee of £6,000 have to agree an access agreement with us. In that access agreement, they lay out how they are going to encourage the participation of these underrepresented groups in their university. They identify their own targets. We do not set targets; we do not set quotas. Individual institutions set their own targets, and they differ as to the groups that they particularly feel they can appropriately increase and encourage to attend their university.

They may do so by supporting those students while they are students, either by fee waivers or by support in terms of bursaries, or in-kind support, or a mixture of those forms of support; or by outreach activity, explaining the advantages of university; or by helping students to be successful while they are on course. For a number of universities, the challenge is not about

widening participation; it is about ensuring that the students from those backgrounds are as successful as other students in their aims at university.

Q45 Rebecca Harris: How much attention do you pay to the types of courses that disadvantaged groups are taking—whether they have chosen the challenging courses, the most likely to lead to a successful career, and that kind of thing? Is that something you do, or is it just the sheer numbers at the moment that you are looking at?

Professor Ebdon: It is, of course, for universities to make the decision about admission to particular courses, and they are concerned about that. They are concerned that students are on appropriate courses. Survey after survey shows that employability is one of the key reasons why students from disadvantaged groups go to university. Access to professions is one of the key issues. A number of universities are recognising this quite strongly; for example, when I went to Oxford University to talk about widening participation there, they naturally included the Careers Service in that, because they see that as part and parcel of what they do to ensure that the students who go to Oxford University from the under-represented groups have fair access to the professions.

For some professions, you need to take a particular course to get into a particular profession, medicine being a very obvious example. For other professions—your previous witness mentioned accountancy—you do not need to take a specific course to enter that profession.

Q46 Rebecca Harris: My other question relates to what I asked earlier, about the representation of women. We now see that they may not be a disadvantaged group in terms of application to university, but there is still a big disparity in terms of the types of courses they are taking. They are tending to take humanities, and not being encouraged, for example, to go for STEM subjects, or engineering, where we really do need to get more students coming through. What importance would you place on that as a problem?

Professor Ebdon: Yes. About 14 universities¹ in their access agreements cite gender targets that relate to specific courses. Nearly all of them relate to the access of men into initial teacher training, particularly primary school. I think that is because the Teaching Agency has pushed universities to do something about the disparity in terms of primary school teachers. I agree with them, because the role models that are set early in life often lead to the aspirations of young people, so it would be good to have more male role models in our primary schools.

¹ Note by witness: In my evidence, I explained that a number of institutions have targets in their access agreements around gender. This is particularly the case for those institutions seeking to increase the number of men entering initial teacher training. I have now had the opportunity to check again the number of institutions providing a gender target. The correct figure is 30 institutions in total, which includes 25 institutions with targets for a greater number of men entering initial teacher training. The point I was making clearly still stands, but I wanted to ensure the committee had the most up to date information.

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There are some very big disparities: 70% of law students are female; over 90% of nursing students are female. Yet, as you say, in engineering programmes there may be less than 20% female students. There are very big disparities. We have seen some changes in recent years; in physics and chemistry the numbers have significantly improved. Certainly in chemistry there is now parity between men and women, which was not the case when I was a chemistry student, I can tell you. In physics things are improving.

There has been some change in recent years in both applications and acceptances in STEM programmes, and some people believe that the increased emphasis on employment outcomes will lead to an increase in students studying STEM subjects. We have yet to see that. The gender differences in applications and courses are still quite remarkable. They are global; they happen in China as well as in the UK, and they certainly happen in the States and in Germany. As you point out, they have the potential to lead to an insufficiency of STEM graduates in this country.

Q47 Katy Clark: This is something that we have been discussing in relation to another Inquiry we are doing on women in work. As you say, there are economic implications of gender stereotyping in terms of course choice. Do you think your statutory functions need to be looked at in any way, or do you feel that you have the right responsibilities and priorities in terms of your statutory responsibilities currently? Is that something you have given consideration to now that you are in post?

Professor Ebdon: It is not high up on the agenda, because I understand that there will not be legislation this Parliament, so I cannot say that it is something that I have had a lot of discussion on. I personally think that we have the right arrangement currently, with independent, autonomous universities deciding what they are going to do. If you look around the world, the most successful university sectors are those with independence and autonomy.

I also happen to know, as a former vice-chancellor, that universities are full of very clever people, and that if you tell them what to do, they find a way around that, but if you engage them in sharing the same values and objectives you have, they will find very clever and innovative ways of achieving that. That is what will happen.

I am sure you are right as a Committee to try to raise the profile of this as an issue, and hopefully universities will respond to it, although, again, they will point out that these patterns are set in schools. That is particularly true about access to STEM subjects. I remember when I was on the Prime Minister's National Council for Educational Excellence. One of the key issues that came up there was the availability of triple science in some schools, because of the way in which they had eased access to the A-level study of physical sciences—and hence, of course, university admission.

Q48 Paul Blomfield: Following on a bit from Katy's point in terms of your remit, one of the big areas of concern across the sector now is that it is the progression to postgraduate taught courses that is

potentially going to be the new barrier to social mobility. Postgraduate taught courses are not part of your remit at the moment, as I understand it. Do you think, looking forward, that this makes sense? If we are really looking at fair access to and through universities, do you think we ought to be including taught postgraduate study within your remit?

Professor Ebdon: The logic of the remit at the moment is that OFFA applies to those courses that have regulated fees. That is the way in which we operate through the access agreements that revolve around regulated fees. One must also say that, obviously, the first entry to university, the access to university, is absolutely crucial in terms of social mobility. That is the real transformational area, but in an increasing number of professions, postgraduate qualifications are necessary and vital. There is concern in the sector around the rise in fees for postgraduate programmes, because for most postgraduate programmes there is no longer going to be a subsidy—although the Government, together with HEFCE, were able to find some money for a subsidy for postgraduate fees for this year. That is continuing at the present time.

In the longer term, if postgraduate programmes become full cost—as undergraduate programmes now are—but there is no fee-loan system there, there could be seen to be a significant disadvantage for people from poorer backgrounds. We can do some things about that at the present time. We have encouraged universities, in the guidance that we have given them, to think about student success in the ways they spend their money under their access agreement. Student success can certainly include preparing people for professional careers and, indeed, preparing people for postgraduate study. A number of universities have decided to put a certain amount of their money in that direction.

If we are merely in the business of encouraging people from widening-participation backgrounds to enter higher education, that is not full access. It is about making sure they are successful in their aim to get a good degree and to enter the professions, which may involve postgraduate work.

Q49 Paul Blomfield: In a similar vein, I wonder if I can ask about parttime study. Obviously we were talking about it earlier. The drop-off in applications for part-time undergraduate programmes is an area of enormous concern. How far do you see that concern as part of your role? How far can you address it within existing access agreements? How far do you think you should have a role going forward?

Professor Ebdon: You are absolutely right in identifying it as an area of concern. It is one that does worry me, because we do not have a role in terms of deciding whether people should study parttime or fulltime, but we do have a role in looking at the typical makeup of part-time courses and saying there is greater representation of the underrepresented groups in parttime undergraduate education, and therefore any decline in that is of concern. Of course, a decline can lead to course closures, which would then lead to less opportunity to those from

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disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education. We are definitely concerned about it.

I am very pleased that Universities UK have established, under the leadership of the President, Professor Eric Thomas, an inquiry to research into why this has happened. We need to reflect the fact that the decline has been quite sharp over the last two years. In 2011, we said, "Maybe the decline is because everybody who can get into higher education is going to go down the fulltime route before the fees increase, and it will recover next year." There was some optimism that it would recover, because for the first time a fee loan for parttime students was available, for which some of us had argued for some time. It was anomalous that parttime students had to pay upfront fees, whereas full-time students got a fee loan. However, it does seem that the increase in the fee that has happened—to a cap of £6,750—has put students off parttime study more than they felt advantaged by the fee loan. It may be that there are economic circumstances. We are in a recession. The recession seems to have gone on for longer than lots of people expected. If you have a job, you do not want to jeopardise it by taking on the extra burden of part-time study. Although the evidence is very strong that parttime study is a significant career enhancement—recent research by Professor Claire Callender, at Birkbeck, University of London for HECSU, has shown how significant part-time study can be in career advancement—maybe people do not feel there is as much career enhancement around in the present part of the economic cycle.

I think it is also seriously worth considering, however, that we were unable to communicate the new system to two groups of students: one was part-time students, and the other was mature students. Again, I knew, as a vice-chancellor when the new system was coming in, that I could easily get an audience of 200 17- or 18-year-olds. I would just ask for an opportunity to talk at a school or a college. You could communicate the system; you could engage in question and answer; and you dealt with 200 people at a time. For part-time students and mature students, again, I have recruited those in my academic career, and each one has to be recruited individually—and recruitment is a contact sport. You have to get out there and explain the system to people. We need to do a lot more work in explaining the new fees and funding system to both parttime and mature students.

Q50 Paul Blomfield: I shall just follow up on part-time and mature students specifically. As I read it, a lot of the strategic shift in your thinking is towards outreach work rather than scholarships and bursaries. I think that is absolutely right, but it really only applies to more conventional entry. It does not really address the issue of part-time and mature students, does it? I just wondered how far that has been a feature of any new access agreements you have been developing. What sorts of roles do you see for universities going forward in that area?

Professor Ebdon: You are quite right in saying we have a strong emphasis on outreach in the agreements. Institutions tell us that some 14% of their access money going forward will be spent on outreach

programmes; 74% will be spent on student support. The evidence in the past has been that outreach has made more impact than student support, and therefore we are expecting to see a shift in that. We are challenging institutions that tell us that their problem is with their applicant pool on what they are doing to increase their applicant pool.

We are doing that, and we have said that outreach programmes should start as young as seven. Some decisions are made in primary school. It needs to be long-term and sustained outreach. It is not true to say that we are not encouraging other institutions to engage with part-time and mature students. For example, I have visited two universities—Oxford Brookes and Southampton Solent—that have buses that go out into communities to try to engage with non-traditional groups—particularly, for example, mature learners—and take the message out to them.

Of course, a number of universities rely very heavily on parttime students. Two are exclusively part-time students. They work very hard on outreach activity to groups. Wherever I have been, universities have a significant investment in parttime education. Our discussions have often been about what they are able to do in terms of communicating the arrangements for parttime and mature students. Part of the message I get back is that we need a national campaign. We can do things locally, but we need a national campaign. Universities UK, again, are responding to that and trying to bring universities together, so that they can brigade some of their access agreement and other spend to sustain an effective campaign. These days, the responsibility for that kind of campaign rests with the universities, rather than with the department.

Q51 Mr Walker: The current set of access agreements were signed off by your predecessor and not by you. What is your assessment of the quality of those agreements? How much do they need to change?

Professor Ebdon: Particularly the last set had a number of ambitious targets in them. I am not seeking to ask people to enhance the ambition of those targets; I am asking them to sustain the ambition of those targets. That is part of the challenge.

When I came in, I said that it would be a period of greater challenge and greater support. The greater challenge will be to sustain those targets despite the changes that are going on. We will be asking people for a much greater evidence base as to why they are doing the things they are doing. £809.5 million of expenditure was committed in those access agreements that were signed off; that is a significant amount of expenditure. Universities are supposed to be evidence-based organisations. We ask, "What is the evidence for the way that you have allocated that spend? Explain your philosophy to us."

We have asked institutions to tie in their equality and diversity monitoring with their access agreement more closely. All universities have a public duty under the Equality Act 2010 to monitor the impact of their policies and their activities on groups with the defined characteristics. That evidence is there in the university; they are required to collect it. We say,

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“Feed that into your access agreements, so that we can see there is joinedup thinking in equality and diversity.”

We have also asked for a stronger student voice to come through and for greater engagement by students. The new system is supposed to put students at the centre. As I go around universities, I do find that students’ unions are very aware of the challenges of access and widening participation. They are very keen to get involved as ambassadors, to go out to schools and colleges, and to go on these buses into communities and so on.

Q52 Mr Walker: I was interested in that. Obviously, you recommended that students’ unions can play a bigger role in that outreach aspect. Are there any universities that are doing that particularly well at the moment in terms of engaging their students’ unions?

Professor Ebdon: Several are doing extremely well. I was at the University of Reading and the students got strongly engaged with the development of the access agreement last year. A number of changes in that agreement were evidenced to me as a result of that. I was at the Honourable Member’s constituency in Sheffield at the University of Sheffield. They actually have a student union president who comes from a widening-participation background; he is quite a remarkable young man, and he is clearly very engaged in the access activities. There is an enormous resource for universities there.

Q53 Mr Walker: Does the increased focus that you put on evidence suggest that you think there are some universities that are departing from the spirit of the access agreements, or is it more that you feel they need to have a stronger evidential base for what they are doing?

Professor Ebdon: They definitely need to have a strong evidential base for what they are doing. I can come in as the new boy and say, “I do not understand why the split of your expenditure is like this, when you tell us your challenge is this.” The classic one is the university that tells us the reason they are finding it difficult to achieve their targets is because they do not get sufficient, well qualified applicants applying from those groups to the university. You would therefore think that the majority of their money would be spent in trying to encourage more applications from those groups and in outreach activity; therefore, if you see it being spent on supporting a small number of students, you then begin to ask, “Based on the evidence, why have you taken the decision that you have?”

It may well be there is a good reason for that, but we would like to know it. The context of the institution is always vital in that.

Q54 Katy Clark: From 2012/13, there is no minimum bursary for new students. How has this change been reflected in access agreements? How are you dealing with that in terms of perhaps putting greater emphasis on other areas of support?

Professor Ebdon: In a sense, of course, the minimum bursary was replaced by an increase in the maintenance grant. This has meant that, rather than

what was often referred to as a postcode lottery, all students are now treated the same—no matter what university they go to. The National Scholarship Programme is also now place.

When the new system came in about 18 months ago, we received new guidance from Government. That guidance suggested we encourage institutions to spend more money on outreach activity and more money on what was called retention at that time, which in this discussion I have termed student success—because it is not just about ensuring that students do not withdraw; it is about ensuring their progression into employment and employability, which is one of the key things students from those groups are looking for. We have certainly reflected this in our guidance by encouraging institutions to invest more heavily in outreach. The Minister welcomed that as an indication—certainly, in the guidance we have just issued—that we are in line with his guidance. For the first time, institutions that had perhaps been very successful in widening participation, but not as successful in ensuring success for those students from those backgrounds, are able to spend significant amounts of access agreement money in encouraging student success.

This has come at a good time, because the Higher Education Academy and others have been doing a lot of research on why it is that students from under-represented groups appear to underperform in university and what things can be done to help them. There are some 14 pilots going on in universities to pilot that research, which was well received, into action plans. Only last week I was at Bournemouth University looking at how one of their programmes is really effective. They have already seen a 2% improvement in their retention record. Young graduates are spearheading the programme. They know what the experience of going through university life is like and what the challenges are. I could see it was a very effective programme in the making.

Q55 Julie Elliott: Your latest guidance highlights the need for evidence and evaluation. What are you looking to universities to provide?

Professor Ebdon: They clearly have to evaluate their programmes. They return to us an annual monitoring return. At the moment, they also give the Higher Education Funding Council for England a widening-participation strategic assessment. I am pleased to say that as part of the National Strategy, we will be amalgamating both of those exercises into one.

They are evaluating their programmes. We have pointed out that good programmes build in evaluation right from the beginning. Evaluation looks both at how your own programme is performing and what the outcomes of that are, but it also looks at other people and the successes other people are having and learns from them.

This is one of the roles I have said we could do in terms of greater support to institutions. We can actually build a better community of shared good practice, so that people know what works in other institutions, and we can think about using it there. From that evaluation, they can put together an access agreement that is built on that evidence base. Of

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course, this then gets evaluated as well and hopefully we move into a virtuous circle. None of this should be news to universities, because this is what we teach our students.

Q56 Julie Elliott: Do you think the evidence will lead to a more prescriptive approach to access agreements if a wide variance in impact is revealed?

Professor Ebdon: I do not think it will be more prescriptive. You are likely to see people consolidate into particular groups, as they see things are successful elsewhere. We are also quite keen to increase the amount of collaboration going on between institutions. One of the things we have emphasised in our guidance this year is that we are actively interested in collaboration. The younger the students we engage in outreach activity, the more collaboration becomes absolutely essential, because if you are talking to seven-year-olds and you raise an issue about going to university, you are not raising the issue about going to a particular university; that comes at a later stage. There is a lot of opportunity for collaboration there.

There are a number of universities that are real flagship universities. They can get engaged in raising aspiration and play a role for the sector. We need to recognise that the work they do may not always lead to students applying or going to that particular university, but they have raised aspiration and achievement among young people, which means they are more likely to go to a university. We are encouraging collaboration. Those collaborative partnerships—some of them based on geography, but some of them based on similarity of mission—are likely to influence people and are likely to engage in similar access activity.

Q57 Ann McKechin: I have one small point on the same subject. One of the biggest influences on children and how they decide their careers is their parents. If you live in a household where no one has been to university before or even college, people might have a negative view about it or be very uncertain or insecure about it. What efforts do you think universities should be making about trying to reach out to parents as well as to their children?

Professor Ebdon: That is a very valid point. It is one that we make in the interim report of the National Strategy for Access and Student Success that we have presented to Ministers. Parents are indeed very influential—and, sadly, sometimes, can be influential in a negative sense. Obviously, as the investment involved in going to university increases, the nervousness of parents seems to increase. I saw an excellent outreach programme in a primary school in one of the more challenging areas of Bournemouth, where one of the biggest advantages of that outreach programme was that it engaged parents as well as students.

A number of universities now run graduation programmes for primary schools. Perhaps I should put inverted commas around the phrase “graduation programme”, but it is to give young people an experience of what it is like to go to a graduation programme. It gives them an opportunity to go to a

university and an opportunity to bring their parents to a university.

Others at both the University of Reading and the University of Nottingham bring primary school children into their university museums. If the students are doing a project on the Romans, they have lots of artefacts there that are very helpful to the project they are doing in the school. It brings the students on to the university campus, and then they go home and they tell their parents about what an exciting time they have had. They bring their parents back for a weekend visit. There are number of things that are happening in universities that do recognise more and more that parents—and, indeed, teachers—are very influential at certain stages of young people’s lives.

Q58 Julie Elliott: How will you ensure the need for greater evidence, which is in your guidance and what you are talking about, will not stifle innovation in outreach work?

Professor Ebdon: I have always found universities to be very innovative places; that will continue. I think quite the reverse. If you ask people to evidence something, people then more rapidly identify the things that are not working, and say, “Look, we need to do something about this. Either we innovate and we change it, or we abandon it altogether and try something else.” Actually, evidence can be a stimulus to innovation in a university environment.

Q59 Mr Walker: To follow up on that, will you be collating the evidence to make sure that the schemes that work get shared among the universities as best practice?

Professor Ebdon: Yes.

Mr Walker: How big a role is there for best practice?

Professor Ebdon: There is a very important role. We need to build communities of good practice. There are a number of resources already that identify good practice. The Higher Education Academy has an elegantly named archive called the WASRS archive, which is about widening access and student retention sources. There is, as it were, a onestop shop for good practice. It contains the legacy of the Aimhigher projects. The evaluation of those carried out by the University of Derby is there, and it identifies what has been successful.

One of the reasons why I am very keen to be invited to both conferences and universities is that, obviously, it gives me the opportunity both to see good practice and to share the good practice I have heard elsewhere. Conferences are an effective way of communicating that—as is the web, and as are publications. We are engaged in all of those and we do, of course, publish an annual report.

Q60 Mr Walker: On the other side of the coin, I suppose, from good practice are unacceptable access agreements. Last year, you discussed the idea of more flexible sanctions with the Committee. Is that something you have had to take further?

Professor Ebdon: No, the Office has always managed to negotiate an acceptable access agreement with people. It is my expectation that will happen again this year.

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The characterisation in the press of a reluctant university sector is way off the mark. Universities contain a lot of people as passionate as I am about widening participation and fair access. These are people who have the same kind of background that I do, whose lives were transformed by going to university and are there because that is what they want to do as well.

Q61 Mr Walker: Sanctions remain something that is theoretical rather than practical. You would hope they remain that way.

Professor Ebdon: They are there. It is not my expectation I will need to use them. If you recall the discussion—colleagues here will recall the discussion—that we actually had, it was about the fact I said I would be reluctant to use them. I was then challenged as to whether I would ever use them and, of course, if you say you will never use a sanction, you do not have a sanction. That is how that whole press story ran.

Q62 Chair: Can I just explore this a little bit further? You might well have a really innovative approach from a university that fails. How will you accommodate that? How will you assess it? How will you incorporate that into your approach to further access agreements with that university?

Professor Ebdon: Chair, I am a chemist by background, as you know, and I believe in doing experiments. If you tell me that every experiment you do works, I would say you have not been ambitious enough. I would expect that universities would engage in a range of activities and would be ambitious in those activities. Some of them would work better than expected; others will not work as well as expected. The key thing is to evaluate what has happened and to stop doing what does not work and concentrate on what does work.

Since OFFA was established, we have seen an increase in participation of more than one-third by what we call the lowest quintile—the group of students who come from the lowest participation neighbourhoods—which is quite a dramatic improvement over eight years. The evidence is that we will see further improvement of that—perhaps up to a 40% increase—when the statistics are in for the last two years.

We are seeing a dramatic improvement. We are seeing the impact of things that universities are doing. We are learning what works and we are going to do more of it.

Q63 Paul Blomfield: I was actually going to follow up on and go back to a point you were making earlier about Abdi Suleiman, the President of the University of Sheffield's Students' Union, who, as you quite rightly say, is a remarkable young man from a very disadvantaged Somali background in Sheffield who has broken through into a Russell Group university. I sat down with Abdi after his election and talked to him about what the factors there were. He was not on his own. One of his schoolmates went on to Oxford. The critical intervention for him was the sustained

engagement of a homework club in the heart of that community.

That is an introduction to a question about strategy, because—together with HEFCE—you are producing a new National Strategy for Access and Student Success. I wondered if we—maybe you do not want to say at this stage—are going to see a significant kind of strategic shift. Earlier, you mentioned the imbalance between the current emphasis on scholarships and outreach work. Personally, I think that, quite wrongly, a lot of the post2005 access agreements had scholarships that were as much directed towards marketing as they were to enhancing access. I just wonder if you are going to be looking to rebalance towards outreach but also move beyond the conventional outreach to the sort of initiatives that made the difference, for example, for Abdi.

Professor Ebdon: I would say that we are thinking along those lines. We have issued two calls for evidence. One really helped us, with virtually every university in the country responding to us in terms of evidence of their successful access activity, which included a lot of outreach activity. We have now asked again for evidence more specifically about successful outreach activity and engaged with the third sector as well. There are a number of really exciting third-sector activities. I have seen 63 stakeholder groups. Quite a number of them are third-sector activity.

There are some very exciting innovations going on. At Nottingham, which is an area where there has been a real lack of aspiration in the community and therefore underachievement in the education sector, both of the large universities are engaged in various ways. Nottingham Trent University has taken over the children's university; I was pleased to go up there to talk to them. I have been up to the University of Nottingham, which is a Russell Group member. They are teaming up with IntoUniversity, a charity that is very active in London at the moment. They concentrate on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They raise their aspiration by linking with universities, but they also raise their achievement by encouraging them in a variety of activities, including homework clubs, achievement-raising weeks and engagement in the schools. That is another exciting development.

The Sutton Trust, of course, has been working with a number of universities in establishing summer-school programmes, which again seem to be very effective. I went to a unique summer-school programme in Oxford just before I came into office to see what was going on there. It was a very exciting programme of hands-on experiments. My only disappointment was that they would not let me get hands-on myself. As a result of that, they say that the students are chosen and identified by contextual information as to who should go on the summer school. They then say that those students are more than twice as likely to apply to the University of Oxford and, when they apply, more than twice as likely to obtain a place at the University. That work has a very significant impact.

There are a number of activities that I have seen but, even more, we have had evidence on that. There really are a number of exciting initiatives going on. That is

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part of the reason we are beginning to see some movement in the figures.

Q64 Paul Blomfield: As a result of your report with HEFCE, are we going to see a significant change in what we might describe as the access landscape?

Professor Ebdon: I think that is right. The evidence that OFFA has—and which has been presented here before by my predecessor—is that under the £3,000 fee system, bursaries and scholarships did not significantly influence student choice of university or, indeed, whether they decided to go to university or not. If they were there as a marketing tool, as you put it, they were not a very effective marketing tool either. Yet we see that some of the outreach activity that is going on is very effective.

Q65 Paul Blomfield: Do you think that has an impact on the role and function of OFFA and your job? Would you be, as part of the report with HEFCE, looking at making any recommendations in terms of your remit?

Professor Ebdon: We obviously receive, from time to time, a letter of guidance from the Secretary of State. I have to give due weight to the letter of guidance that I receive. I am independent as a regulator, yet I am grateful for the guidance I receive from the Government of the day.

The last set of guidance that we had from this Government emphasised their interest in outreach activity and, indeed, their interest in ensuring that students from widening-participation backgrounds who come into university are successful. We are probably pushing along a road that is opening to us.

We have found that the guidance that we have given this year in our access agreements has been well received by universities. In it, we emphasised both the importance of expenditure on outreach and on student success, and suggested that people need to have stronger evidence to sustain the current level of expenditure on student support. Their way of thinking is coming around to this at the same time.

Q66 Paul Blomfield: That is certainly true for the vice-chancellors I have spoken to. Can I just ask one further question on outreach in terms of where responsibility lies? You talk about the importance of early intervention, and that is absolutely right. You talk about the importance of intervention at primary level. It does change the way that outreach is done fairly significantly. You have mentioned the need for a more collaborative approach between higher education institutions. Where does the balance of responsibility fall between higher education institutions and schools themselves? What challenges should we perhaps be making to schools to raise aspirations? There is quite a lot of evidence that it is teachers' expectations that are holding people back, not only in whether to go but also which university to go to.

Professor Ebdon: You are referring to the Sutton Trust research, which showed that over 50% of teachers would not recommend even their most able students apply to a highly selective university. Stated like that, it sounds like quite shocking evidence. I

personally think that teachers are very important and influential. Universities need to engage with teachers and understand why it is they think that way.

There is a continual challenge to offer better feedback on applicants. When I talk to groups of teachers, it is very often cited to me that they are really looking for better feedback from universities as to why their students have not been selected for a particular university. Universities have to recognise that challenge. I know where the nervousness comes from: if you give information that is too specific, can you then be sued? There is some nervousness about that, but we need to work on that interface more carefully. We will be encouraging universities to get much more engaged with schools. Do not forget, however, they are; many universities have established their own academies or are co-sponsors of academies. I am going to the opening of the University College London Academy this afternoon, if you will let me out. That is another example of a very significant intervention by a university in a community where there has been under-representation in universities.

I went to the University of East Anglia. They have sponsored an academy right next door to the university. There is a very strong interaction between the two of them. It is a fantastic school. The important thing is that the levels of achievement are significantly increased. We have seen that in a number of examples of universities getting engaged. As a consequence, of course, universities are much better informed about what is going on in schools and what the challenges are, and are more responsive to them. It is a win-win situation.

Q67 Nadhim Zahawi: Welcome, Professor Ebdon. It feels, to me, that you have spent your time since September in collaborative mode, rather than nuclear-option mode. Have you had to make the threat of the nuclear option to any institution to get them to behave differently?

Professor Ebdon: No.

Q68 Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you for that answer. We just talked about some innovative approaches, like my old alma mater, UCL, with the academy. In your experience, what works best: taking school children to universities, or taking universities into schools?

Professor Ebdon: They both have their place. Pupils coming on to a university campus can often have their aspirations raised considerably. Of course, some things are difficult to take out to the schools. Queen Mary, University of London, another Russell Group university with a good record in access and widening participation, has a science and medicine facility, which I have seen myself, that is specifically designed so that school children can see frontline research going on. You cannot take research on the human genome out into schools very easily. There is a severe risk of contamination, at least. There are some things pupils can only be brought to.

Equally, though, getting out to schools is also important. It is much more likely to engage parents. In terms of longterm sustained intervention, there is value in it. They both have their role. Personally, I think that the focus is likely to be in the school

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situation, with more occasional visits to the university campus.

Q69 Chair: Before you go on, can I come in on this? I certainly accept that they both have their role, but do you not feel that just taking students from a disadvantaged area—many of those students may not have travelled very far at all—and, say, putting them in a more cloistered university atmosphere might incentivise some but could be quite intimidating to others?

Professor Ebdon: My philosophy is that universities have to be welcoming and friendly. You are absolutely right: it would be very counterproductive if you set up an intimidating atmosphere. You would only perpetuate certain myths about universities that are not very helpful.

Chair: My question is actually based on an experience that I had with an assistant. I will not mention the university, but it was an off-putting experience.

Professor Ebdon: That is very unfortunate. Again, as we move on in this debate and in our understanding, people are developing professionals whose job is the engagement with schools. Not every professor is suited to going into a classroom, but there are some outstanding individuals who are really committed. I have seen some great groups of people and some great events, I must say, that have been quite inspirational.

Q70 Nadhim Zahawi: Following on from that, my own limited and anecdotal experience of careers advisers is you can get some pretty inspirational people in that role. A particular school in my constituency, Stratford School, have a banker who shunned that profession to become a careers adviser. He has brought all of that entrepreneurial knowledge and know-how into it and has been transformational. Do you survey, communicate with or audit careers advice at schools in any way?

Professor Ebdon: No, we do not. Schools, of course, are the responsibility of a different Department of Government. It was Alan Milburn's report that pointed out the key role that the National Careers Service have to play in this. We have been through this slight hiatus as we move from one system to another. It has been coincident with the introduction of the new funding arrangements. It has been occasionally problematic, as we all know.

Q71 Nadhim Zahawi: Given the disparity between young men and women going to university, will there be a specific focus on boys and young men? If yes, how will that be delivered?

Professor Ebdon: It is up to universities. As I say, a number of universities already do have programmes. The Minister recently spoke about the challenge of white workingclass boys. I think some of the statistics your earlier witness gave you are quite stunning. Even if all of the boys from that group who currently apply were to get in, there would still be far fewer of them than the girls, because the rate of application is now so low.

It is not only a challenging issue for our society; as I say, it is a global problem. The evidence from schools

is, of course, that the achievement gap between boys and girls is not growing as fast as it was, which hopefully is a sign it may be about to reverse and close again. It is something that we should be concerned about; I have said that.

It has important implications for our society going forward, given that being a graduate is still a key to certain careers. There will be a growing graduate premium, according to OECD research.

Q72 Nadhim Zahawi: In terms of your role, of fair access, do you think that there will come a point at which some time in the future you will say to the Government, "My job is done. I have worked myself out of a job. There is no need for OFFA," or will there always be a need for the monitoring of social demographics of students?

Professor Ebdon: You establish a regulator because you think the market will not achieve this without regulation. It is probably true to say that what we are trying to do here is counter to market forces. Clearly, the easiest students to teach are the ones who have had advantaged educations. They are less troublesome; they require less financial support. If you were merely looking at it from a market perspective, you would not necessarily be in the business of widening participation.

If you look at it from a Government's perspective, they have to think about the future economy of this country. They have to think about the future social cohesion of this country. They have to think about their responsibilities as citizens in terms of fulfilling their full potential. Above all, I hope they think about sustaining the excellence of our world-class university system and ensuring that everybody with the potential to succeed gets an opportunity. If those things are against the market, a regulator has a job to do.

The best regulators are like the best referees: you do not notice them. That is what I would aim to be. Would we ever get to a situation where we did not need a regulator? I suspect not, because, as I say, it is counter to the market. However, the challenge at the moment is so large. Do not forget that you are six to seven times more likely to be in a highly selective university if you come from the most advantaged 20% of the population than if you come from the most disadvantaged 40% of the population.

There is a big challenge on. It will not be achieved, I suspect, in my lifetime—and certainly not in my lifetime as regulator.

Q73 Chair: Before we finish, can I challenge something you said a few moments ago? I am paraphrasing, but you said, in effect, that universities are working in a market economy and you are trying to reverse part of the natural movement within a free market, and that, in effect, disadvantaged students needed more support than those from advantaged backgrounds. However, that seems, to me, to run rather contrary to the argument that is put forward for universities accepting students from disadvantaged backgrounds with slightly lower grades at A-level than those from advantaged backgrounds on the basis that they do rather better. There is statistical evidence to demonstrate they do rather better. It would seem to

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me that the difficulties arise, if you like, at the preuniversity entrance level, rather than at the university-entrance level. Is that a fair comment?

Professor Ebdon: It is a complex area. You are absolutely right: the research from the University of Bristol is very strong. Students who come from an underperforming school, if you give them access to the university with a discount of one or two grades at A-level, still outperform those from a privileged school. It, perhaps, is not a surprise. That is the research they have done and the underpinning of their use of contextual information in their admissions process. An increasing number of universities have recognised that.

There is also, of course, evidence that says that students from certain under-represented groups actually underperform at university, even compared with the A-level grades they have. It is particularly true of AfroCaribbean students. The Higher Education Academy has done quite a lot of research on that. Some features of disadvantage continue on in university. We need to recognise those, identify what they are and do what we can to ameliorate that so that students fulfil their full potential. Other aspects of disadvantage maybe decline rather rapidly at university. If the disadvantage was in terms of the teaching you received, provided you have sufficient knowledge and achievement to succeed, it may be that you can fairly rapidly overcome a small disadvantage in that area.

Q74 Chair: Can I finish on a slightly different question? Obviously, your role is to improve access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there is a wider skills agenda, as well as pressure to get students to take up courses that may be more relevant to filling skills gaps in the wider economy. Do you feel you have any role in that area? Do you feel that the access agreements you are getting in place will go some way to dealing with that?

Professor Ebdon: No, I think access agreements are—as the name implies—about access to university. I have to choose my words carefully here, because I have been misunderstood in the past. It is my belief that everybody who has the ability and the motivation to go to university should get that opportunity. I also recognise, however, that it is not necessarily for everyone. I am fully supportive of the drive to provide more apprenticeships.

Chair: I was not really thinking of apprenticeships. I was thinking at the HE level. We are talking about the STEM subjects.

Professor Ebdon: I see. There is a lively debate to be had about whether we need a wider variety of qualifications in higher education. These could fill the skills needs. There are now a number of degree courses that are quite vocational and fitted to particular industries. They will, I assume, succeed or fail on their ability to satisfy the needs of those industries. There are other programmes that are more generalist in nature and, indeed, have been running for a number of years.

There is still a very strong dependency on the three-year honours degree. There are some questions as to whether it would not be better to have more

foundation years and, indeed, more foundation degrees. The recent core and margin policy was an attempt by the Government to encourage more further education colleges to provide either HND or foundation degree programmes alongside the degree programmes that already exist.

There have been a variety of initiatives to meet our skills needs in this country. Of course, one of the key determinants in that is student choice. The new system is there to promote student choice. Over the years, I have learned to trust the choices of students. They have a better understanding of the way the world is moving than perhaps I do.

Q75 Chair: Do you feel that, if you are successful—and I fervently hope that you are—in raising the level of access from disadvantaged backgrounds but there is still a mismatch between, if you like, the courses and qualifications that are obtained by the students and the needs of the wider economy, you may come under pressure to tailor your access agreements to in some way fill that gap? In effect, this would be manipulating access to meet defined skills requirements.

Professor Ebdon: I do not think so. This country does not have a particularly strong record at being able to manipulate the student market to meet skills gaps; I do not think that is a direction in which we are moving as a country at the present time.

One of the things that is helpful—and one of your colleagues has already mentioned it—is the engagement of employers in education. There is a key role for employers to play in access and widening participation. Employers can be very influential, going into schools, colleges and, indeed, universities to identify particular careers options. It is a feature of students coming from backgrounds without traditions in the professions. Maybe the only professions they have ever met in the past are doctors, teachers and social workers. There are a host of other professions that should be accessible to them in a modern democratic society.

Q76 Chair: We are getting to where I wanted to get on this. Do you not feel that there is a role for you in your engagement with universities to at least look at the level of engagement they have with businesses in order to address this particular problem?

Professor Ebdon: Yes, I do. That is one of the reasons why we have been emphasising student success rather than retention as an expression in our access agreement guidance. Very often, the challenge, if you have come from an area where you have not had much interaction with employers, can be that you will not have had the same opportunities.

The classic one is that if you come from a professional background, you can probably much more readily get a work-experience opportunity for your child than those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Universities need to recognise that is a challenge. It is something they are increasingly doing something about.

One of the things we have emphasised in the interim report of the National Strategy for Access and Student Success is the importance of partnership in this whole area, and not just partnerships between universities

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and not just partnership between HEFCE and OFFA, but partnerships between universities, schools and colleges, partnerships with teachers and parents, and partnerships with employers.

We all need to be on board with this challenge. Sir Alan Langlands and I are very keen to be submitting this strategy to Government. We have pointed out to

them that it does not just depend on HEFCE and OFFA; it depends upon that partnership.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will be producing a report in due course. Thank you for your contribution. That was very helpful indeed. Thank you.

Written evidence

Supplementary written evidence from Professor Les Ebdon

Thank you for your email, seeking further information on applications and acceptances to physics and chemistry courses in recent years. I note your request is for data from 2008–12. However, I hope that the committee will appreciate that I made a direct comparison with my time as a student, more than 40 years previously.

Below are two tables providing the committee with the information requested. The tables show a significant increase in the numbers of women applying for, and being accepted to, chemistry and physics courses in recent years.

Table 1¹

NUMBERS OF *APPLICANTS* BY GENDER AND SUBJECT AREAS DEFINED BY JOINT ACADEMIC CODING SYSTEM (JACS)

UCAS APPLICATION CYCLES 2008 TO 2012

<i>Subject areas defined by JACS</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>
Chemistry	Female	1,585	1,535	1,810	1,935	1,865
	Male	2,285	2,360	2,715	2,950	3,025
Physics	Female	735	830	930	1,030	1,170
	Male	2,980	3,165	3,555	4,350	4,585

Table 2

NUMBERS OF *ACCEPTED APPLICANTS* BY GENDER AND SUBJECT AREAS DEFINED BY JACS

UCAS APPLICATION CYCLES 2008 TO 2012

<i>Subject areas defined by JACS</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>
Chemistry	Female	1,700	1,645	1,785	1,905	1,815
	Male	2,340	2,325	2,595	2,630	2,695
Physics	Female	690	765	810	835	925
	Male	2,765	2,955	3,015	3,475	3,635

There are, of course, some limitations to this data. UCAS is not the only route into university; it does not, for example, record part-time students, or those progressing from science foundation years. In order to provide as much useful information as possible to the committee I have included below a table showing enrolments in physics and chemistry for 2008–09 to 2011–12. This data is taken from HESA figures, and is provided in terms of full-time equivalent numbers so does, therefore, include part-time students. The committee will wish to note that the use of HESA cost code definitions still limit this data somewhat.

Table 3²

NUMBERS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT FTE *ENROLLED* IN PHYSICS AND CHEMISTRY BY GENDER AND HESA COST CENTRE, 2008–09 TO 2011–12

<i>HESA cost centre</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>2008–09</i>	<i>2009–10</i>	<i>2010–11</i>	<i>2011–12</i>
Chemistry	Female	6,724	6,778	7,045	7,619
	Male	7,521	7,508	8,126	8,862
Physics	Female	2,635	2,724	2,945	3,038
	Male	8,024	8,198	8,790	9,527

The data provided will not capture every student studying chemistry or physics. For example, students who study biochemistry or forensic science often study sufficient chemistry to be eligible for Chartered Chemist status with professional training but will not be included in the JACS chemistry code.

¹ Table 1 and Table 2: Analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data and publically-available UCAS data by the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) analytical services group, with subject groups defined according to HEFCE analysis in support of strategically important and vulnerable subjects (see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/data/year/2012/dataondemandandsupplyinhighereducationsubjects/> for further details). UCAS data relates to applicants and accepted applicants to UK institutions, and figures provided are a headcount measure.

² Table 3: Numbers of undergraduate enrolments are based on HEFCE's Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey population with respect to subject areas classified by the HESA academic cost centres. These data include all undergraduates registered at higher education institutions in England: across all modes of study (full- and part-time); from all domiciles (UK, EU and other international); and in all years of study. Figures provided are a measure of full-time equivalent student numbers, and do not include non-completions.

In order to be helpful I have, therefore, provided some information on some particular courses which would, I believe, fit in with a broader definition of chemistry. Data on these courses shows a significant increase in the number of women studying chemistry based subjects. While they use a slightly different dataset, these tables do suggest that there is now broad parity between men and women studying chemistry courses. The figures below relate to numbers of undergraduate enrolments in terms of a headcount measure and are drawn from analysis HESA data with respect to subject areas classified by JACS.

Table 4³

NUMBERS OF UCAS *APPLICANTS*, UCAS *ACCEPTANCES* AND UNDERGRADUATE *ENROLMENTS*
MOLECULAR BIOLOGY, BIOPHYSICS AND BIOCHEMISTRY

		2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13
UCAS applicants	Female	951	1,098	1,106	1,342	1,454
	Male	939	1,042	1,174	1,374	1,474
UCAS acceptances	Female	1,246	1,184	1,236	1,536	1,750
	Male	1,122	1,090	1,187	1,336	1,510
Undergraduate enrolments (JACS based figures)	Female	4,095	4,520	4,695	5,365	n/a
	Male	3,320	3,580	3,905	4,385	n/a

Table 5

NUMBERS OF UCAS *APPLICANTS*, UCAS *ACCEPTANCES* AND UNDERGRADUATE *ENROLMENTS*
FORENSIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCIENCE

		2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13
UCAS applicants	Female	1,050	1,176	1,292	1,380	1,162
	Male	541	618	763	790	644
UCAS acceptances	Female	1,159	1,275	1,300	1,412	1,239
	Male	692	774	819	832	779
Undergraduate enrolments (JACS based figures)	Female	3,930	4,120	4,090	4,195	n/a
	Male	2,485	2,845	3,070	3,090	n/a

I hope this information is of assistance to the committee.

Professor Les Ebdon CBE DL
Director of Fair Access to Higher Education

8 April 2013

³ Table 4 and Table 5: Numbers of undergraduate enrolments are based on the HESA standard registration population with respect to subject areas classified by JACS. These data include all undergraduates registered at HEIs in England; across all modes of study (full- and part-time); from all domiciles (UK, EU and other international); and in all years of study. Figures provided are a headcount measure.

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