



House of Commons

Business, Innovation and Skills
Committee

Pre-Appointment Hearing: Appointment of Director of the Office for Fair Access

Oral evidence

Thursday 2 February 2012

Professor Leslie Ebdon

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 2 February 2012*

Business, Innovation and Skills Committee

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Contacts

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Oral evidence

Taken before the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on Thursday 2 February 2012

Members present:

Mr Adrian Bailey (Chair)

Mr Brian Binley
Katy Clark
Rebecca Harris
Margot James

Simon Kirby
Ann McKechin
Nadhim Zahawi

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Professor Leslie Ebdon**, the Government's preferred candidate for the post of Director of the Office for Fair Access, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, Professor Ebdon, and welcome. We are slightly early but if you are comfortable, we will start five minutes early, because we have got a lot of questions and the sooner we get through them, the better.

Professor Ebdon: I am sure I am as comfortable as I will be.

Q2 Chair: Would you just like to introduce yourself for voice transcription purposes?

Professor Ebdon: Yes. I am Professor Les Ebdon; I am currently Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire. I am the preferred candidate for the post of Director of OFFA

Q3 Mr Binley: Welcome, Professor Ebdon. Why do you want the job?

Professor Ebdon: I find the job very exciting. I am passionate about access to university. Going to university transformed my life; I grew up on a corporation estate.

Mr Binley: So did I.

Professor Ebdon: I was fortunate to go to a good school and get into Imperial College, and I have had wonderful opportunities ever since. As Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire we transform hundreds of lives every year. It is very exciting. It is probably the most positive thing one can do in terms of social mobility and giving people opportunities.

Q4 Mr Binley: I share your excitement and I also share a similarity in background. Why do you think people from our background are unable to compete properly in the university marketplace?

Professor Ebdon: Well, I think two of the key features are aspiration and achievement, and I put them in that order because I think it is still true to say—I am sure you had the same from your peer group as I did from mine—university is not for the likes of us; it is for other sorts of people. We must get people to aspire to go to university and to realise what opportunities will be available to them if they can go. Once they have that aspiration, we can help them achieve, so that they get the necessary qualifications to take up the opportunity.

Q5 Mr Binley: I have one final question. Many businesses feel that the way we have developed—or not developed—universities over the last 20 or 30 years or so has been very harmful to people; they have degrees that many businessmen see as pretty useless. How would you respond to that question?

Professor Ebdon: I would certainly respond with the figures from the University of Bedfordshire, for example. I am sorry; I keep using examples from my own university, but I know them best. 92% of our graduates are in employment or further study within six months of graduation. In fact, our unemployment rate has never risen above 5% throughout the recession. The response we get from graduates is that they are very much welcome.

Q6 Mr Binley: I did not ask the question from the graduates' perspective, as you well know. I asked it from a business perspective. What about the information there?

Professor Ebdon: I use those figures to say that clearly employers find some value in those graduates. One has to take seriously, in the university sector, the comments from employers about the skills of graduates, and one needs to reflect that in the programmes. I am sure other Vice-Chancellors will also point out to you that the sole purpose of universities is not to provide graduates for the employment market. It happens that I passionately believe that is also part of the job of transforming lives to get people into employment.

Q7 Chair: I welcome your comments. Now, I realise you are not responsible for the job specs. However, what concerns me is that this says that, "The appointment will be on a part-time basis, averaging three days a week." Now, given the vital strategic significance of this particular position in widening access and participation in universities, how do you feel about that? Would you not have said that it was a full-time job? Can you give a full-time commitment to it?

Professor Ebdon: What is very important is one has an Office that is capable of delivering on the tasks it is given, and I notice the Office has grown from some two and a half people to 11 people. It has been greatly

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strengthened, and that is appropriate. We saw the Office established under Sir Martin Harris, and when it was first established it was somewhat controversial. There was not entire agreement that it was an activity that we needed, and he established the Office with a very small staff. Now we realise the size of the issues that need to be tackled, and the Office has been increased significantly. The task of a director is one of leadership, and I am not unhappy with the terms offered in the job specification

Q8 Chair: How many institutions do you estimate OFFA will have to deal with?

Professor Ebdon: The number will probably increase substantially as we see higher education in further education colleges and direct access of those colleges to the student loan funding, and so I expect the present 150 or so institutions will grow somewhat. It is interesting to note that OFFA, in a recent press release, spoke about strong interactions and negotiations with 50 institutions, and I am not sure that number would greatly grow. The vast majority of those institutions will be: a) small in number; and b) will be very committed to access and have good records in that area. Most of the interactions are likely to be with a small number of institutions, and with the right approach that number will actually decrease rather than increase.

The additional staff in OFFA are very valuable in terms of being able to do proper research on the barriers to access and, as we have just discussed, to identify areas of good practice and spread that across the sector.

Q9 Chair: Sorry, I am not altogether clear. First you said 150 and then you said 50. Now, I quite realise that there is a substantial group of universities that you won't be signing off access agreements with, but how many do you think you will be dealing with initially?

Professor Ebdon: I think there are likely to be 150 institutions that will need access agreements signed off, because any institution that is going to charge more than £6,000 per year in fees will need an access agreement. A number of universities are likely to move to charging only £7,500 so they can bid for additional places, because of the introduction of the core-and-margin model, but even at £7,500 you need to have an access agreement. The 50 I was referring to were the 50 in the OFFA press release last year, in which it indicated it had had serious negotiations with some 50 institutions about what was in their access agreement. Clearly, last year 100 access agreements came in and presented no issues for the Office, but some 50 resulted in negotiations.

Q10 Chair: Just so that I have it clear in my mind, you would be dealing with potentially 150, but of those only 50 would raise issues and concerns that OFFA had to be, shall we say, substantially engaged with?

Professor Ebdon: I think the focus is likely to be on about 50 institutions, and if I do the job well, that number should decrease rather than increase.

Q11 Chair: You said earlier you had 11 members of staff in OFFA and you expressed satisfaction with that. Do you really think that is enough?

Professor Ebdon: Yes. Well, it is early days yet and I obviously welcome the increase in the capacity of the Office. It is particularly important if we are going to conduct serious research into what are perceived to be the barriers to access and if we are going to spread good practice. That seems to me to be a good number. One realises that it is quite extraordinary to have an expansion of numbers of people paid on the public purse at this time, and I am grateful for that.

Q12 Chair: You made an interesting comment there. You said, "doing research", so you do see your role as potentially a research body as well, if you like—as engaging with universities in practical terms on their agreement?

Professor Ebdon: That is the scientist and academic in me. I prefer to make decisions based on sound research, and at the moment there is a paucity of research in understanding exactly what the barriers are to access: why young people from certain groups do not come forward for higher education.

Q13 Chair: So, do you see a role in OFFA in exploring that to develop policy?

Professor Ebdon: I do indeed; I see a role in developing that into good practice and sharing it.

Q14 Chair: Can I just go on to the more personal elements of it? In terms of your career in higher education, how did you arrive as Vice-Chancellor as the University of Bedfordshire?

Professor Ebdon: I got both my degrees at Imperial College. I am a chemist by background, and from there I obtained a lecturing post at Makerere University in Kampala in Uganda. I thought I would be there for a number of years, but Idi Amin had different ideas. I returned somewhat unexpectedly to the UK. I was very grateful to take a position at what was then Sheffield Polytechnic and then became Sheffield Hallam University. That was an excellent experience for me because I realised there were a group of youngsters and, indeed, not so young people who came into higher education and sought a degree, often later in life, from areas where nobody had been to university before—not just in their family but in their community. It was a very exciting experience for me.

Q15 Chair: What is there in your background that makes you ideal for this post?

Professor Ebdon: I know the sector exceptionally well. I have a track record in terms of access. University of Bedfordshire is regarded as having an outstanding track record in access. I know how to achieve opportunity for all, and I have good rapport with all parts of the sector and have, as I say, a passion for access.

Q16 Chair: You are currently Chair of million+, which has a very specific view on higher education matters not necessarily shared by all other sectors. How do you think that has influenced your wider view

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of higher education, and how do you think you will now engage with sectors that may not have shared the million+ perspective?

Professor Ebdon: You will note that, on my taking over as Chair of million+, we rebranded ourselves as a think-tank. We see our major purpose as to put ideas into play. I think the ideas we have put forward on access and opportunity have been very well respected right across the sector. We have possibly been slightly more controversial in one or two other areas, but I think that by and large other Vice-Chancellors very much recognise and welcome the contribution to widening participation that the universities that subscribe to million+ have made.

Q17 Ann McKechin: Good morning, Professor Ebdon. I wonder if I could ask you, just firstly, what is the current drop-out rate within the university?

Professor Ebdon: Yes. About 18% of students do not complete.

Q18 Ann McKechin: Okay. Do you think emphasis should be given by your new Office to the issue of drop-out rates rather than just access?

Professor Ebdon: Yes. I think the issue about access encompasses the opportunity for people to get to university and to achieve success while they are at university, and I would hope to project forward in terms of graduate success, although I recognise that is less of an issue for the Office. But preparing people for graduate success is part of the access agenda for universities.

Q19 Ann McKechin: Do you think a drop-out rate of 18% is unsatisfactory?

Professor Ebdon: It is unsatisfactory and it is something that we have worked very hard to bring down. We have brought it down from a significantly higher figure, but it is still not good enough. The kind of students we have at University of Bedfordshire do not have a second chance in higher education; that is their one and only chance. Every drop-out is a personal tragedy, and one we work hard to try to avoid.

Q20 Ann McKechin: Can I just ask you whether you have had any analysis of the issue of participation by students from lower socio-economic groups in SET subjects as compared with humanities?

Professor Ebdon: I have not had any. I am not aware that OFFA has, although there is certainly plenty of anecdotal evidence around that engineering has appealed much more to lower socio-economic classes than some other subjects. It is interesting, in the UCAS figures this year, to see that—and, indeed, you will find nearly every university has been reporting this—there has been a strong swing towards science, engineering and technology.

Q21 Ann McKechin: Given the fact that students in SET subjects are likely to enjoy higher income levels when they leave university than those who are not—unless it is a professional subject such as medicine or law—would part of your work in your Office be about

the participation levels in these subjects and how lack of participation can be addressed?

Professor Ebdon: Indeed, that is important, and I recently gave evidence at a House of Lords inquiry on STEM and made those points. There are issues that we need to address both in schools and in the first year in universities in SET subjects. I think this, again, has been recognised as an issue in some of the reports that the previous Government received on this issue.

Q22 Ann McKechin: Would it be your intention that your Office would provide some sort of best practice guidelines or analytical evidence for universities to test themselves against?

Professor Ebdon: I think that might be going a little bit further than the remit, but what would be good would be to bring universities together to share good practice on participation in SET and what needs to be done. A factor that was made a very strong issue at the House of Lords inquiry was that raised by a number of my colleague Vice-Chancellors from different universities, particularly from the Russell Group, who pointed out the need to put on what they called “remedial mathematics”—what I would rather call equalising studies in mathematics—for students from widening participation backgrounds because their mathematics background was less strong than those from independent schools. Of course, to put on that additional work costs money. That is one of the reasons, of course, why I have been so pleased to see potential investment in the widening participation remit.

Q23 Ann McKechin: That comes to my next question. You stated that your style would be “an iron fist in a velvet glove” as Director of this organisation. Given that, clearly, a number of universities have only given a fig leaf in terms of increasing participation and are not particularly interested in statutory bodies or offices—and have made that rather clear over the years—how do you think your iron fist is going to be used and how effective is it going to be?

Professor Ebdon: One needs to switch very much to looking at outcomes. It is important that universities set challenging targets. You are quite right in saying that we have actually slid back in some universities in widening participation, and we must make up that lost ground immediately before we move forward. It is very important to me that universities set challenging targets.

Universities are independent, autonomous organisations, and they work best when you respect that independence, but, equally, they should be evidence based in their thinking. They should know what things to do to improve participation, and they should realise that if they do not do that, there will be an office that will not be afraid to deploy sanctions if they do not achieve the outcomes.

We need to be very open and transparent about this: there needs to be agreement on targets; those need to be made public; there needs to be the sharing of good practice; and people who persistently do not achieve their targets need to realise that there will be sanctions, because the Government are serious about this agenda.

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Q24 Ann McKechin: What do you think is most important to the post of Director: experience of the higher education sector or a thorough understanding of the needs of lower socio-economic groups?

Professor Ebdon: I am not sure they are mutually exclusive, and both of them are incredibly valuable assets as a Director.

Q25 Nadhim Zahawi: Professor, thank you for making the time to be here. You mentioned that there is a paucity of research into access and the needs of lower socio-economic groups. How do you think the Russell Group universities have fared in terms of their commitment to this agenda?

Professor Ebdon: I think the commitment has been mixed. There are some colleagues in Russell Group universities who are as passionate as I am about access. I would be aiming to strengthen their position so that their passion reverberates throughout the whole of their university and we see this change.

The evidence that the current Director gave to the recent higher education inquiry under Lord Browne was that, in the so-called recruiting universities, there was a ratio of one for those students who came from the 40% of families who are regarded as less economically advantaged compared with those from the 20% that are seen as the most economically advantaged, which is as it should be, because background should not be a barrier to going into higher education or, indeed, to being a success in higher education or a success as a graduate. That ratio is not one in some selective universities. It was one to six; it is now one to seven.

Clearly, we have a challenge on our hands, and that is the role of the Director of OFFA: to make sure the major changes that are going on in higher education and that could potentially have significant benefits do not have a detrimental impact on the opportunities for those from lower socio-economic classes, or, indeed, any group, whether be it ethnic minority groups, mature students—who one has to be a little bit worried about at the moment, following the UCAS figures—or those with disabilities.

Chair: Professor Ebdon, I realise you are answering a question from an individual, but if you could speak into the mic a bit more, we would hear more clearly at this end.

Q26 Nadhim Zahawi: So, you think that their performance has been patchy; is that what you are saying?

Professor Ebdon: It has, and on the figures, obviously, there has been a regression.

Q27 Nadhim Zahawi: I want to go back to the background of the individual for this role and some of your answers to why you think you are best placed to fulfil this role. Under “Communicate persuasively and publicly, with excellent presentational skills” you mention the work you have done with UUK and million+, and you have done lots of television: *Newsnight*, BBC, ITN, Channel 4, Sky and so on. You have obviously been, in that role, passionately opposed to the Government’s policy in the sense of the Browne Report, tuition fees versus a graduate tax,

which you promoted quite heavily, including in evidence to this Committee. Would you not think that by taking on this role, where you now would be a spokesman for, effectively, the strategy of the Department, you would open yourself to challenges and accusations of hypocrisy by *Newsnight* and others?

Professor Ebdon: It won’t be from Parliament, because I learnt yesterday it is unparliamentary language. Look, my job, as Vice-Chancellor of a university and, indeed, the Chair of million+, was to argue very strongly for my university and for my students, and I did that.

Nadhim Zahawi: And you certainly did that.

Professor Ebdon: The role of Director of OFFA is not the same. It is an independent regulator, so it is not a creature of Government and it would be quite improper for the Director of OFFA to interfere with the democratic process. That is for Parliament to determine.

Q28 Nadhim Zahawi: Yes, I hear you, but in the court of public opinion the world does not work like that, because you will be a spokesman and you will be required to do media work. As you say in your submission to us, you are good at it. You will be challenged. People will say, “Well, you held that opinion before; have you had a Damascene conversation now?” What will be your answer?

Professor Ebdon: My answer would be that Government policy has been decided, Parliament has voted and I respect that. I am grateful to live in a democracy. I mentioned my experience in Uganda; that certainly taught me the value of living in a democracy.

Q29 Nadhim Zahawi: As the interviewer—I will play the devil’s advocate—“Do you support the Government’s policy?”

Professor Ebdon: It is not for the Director of OFFA to decide Government policy. Government policy has been decided; it has been democratically decided and the job of the Director of OFFA is to make sure there are not adverse consequences for particular groups who otherwise would not be able to access higher education. That is the role of OFFA and, in a sense, in a challenging environment—and it is a challenging environment for access—that role becomes even more important, and I think it is even more important. It is a brave step for the Government to select me as their preferred candidate, knowing that I have taken an independent view, but I well understand I will not have the opportunities in the future to comment on a wide range of Government policy. It will be my job to make sure that students, as the major customer of higher education, are protected.

Q30 Nadhim Zahawi: But you can see why the Committee has to ask you this question, i.e. this is a challenging role. You will be probed on it. You will have to, at some stage, answer the question as to why you held the views that you did hold, and why you no longer champion those views, and what your views are on these things. I do not think—whether it is a probing interview on *Newsnight* or elsewhere—it will

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be good enough to just say, “Well, I don’t comment on these things.” You can see where this could end up, can you not, Professor?

Professor Ebdon: I can see where it would end up if I did comment on a wide range of educational issues. It would not be my role as the independent Director of OFFA to comment on a wide range of educational issues. I will confine myself to access issues and protecting those potentially vulnerable groups of students.

Q31 Mr Binley: Might I have a supplementary question? You cannot eradicate history. The press certainly will not allow you to eradicate history, and I would like to understand a little more about how you would deal with that situation in reality. It is no good saying you won’t comment. You cannot sit there and say, “No comment,” and be credible. How are you going to deal with this? Are you going to adjust your positions previously? What techniques will you use?

Professor Ebdon: I am certainly well aware you cannot eradicate history. I also do not wish to resile from opinions that I have held. It is one thing to be the Vice-Chancellor of a university and the Chair of a think-tank and to advocate on a wide range of issues; it is another thing to be the independent Director of OFFA. I do repeat: it would be inappropriate for me to comment on those issues, but I have no intention to press the delete button on anything I have said before.

Mr Binley: I find that a politician’s answer; perhaps that is the way you are going to progress, is it?

Q32 Nadhim Zahawi: Professor, will you relinquish your role as Chairman of the million+ think-tank or will you continue with that?

Professor Ebdon: Certainly, yes.

Q33 Nadhim Zahawi: Just going back to enforcing access agreements, do you think you will find it easy to enforce those access agreements with people who have, up until now, been your colleagues or even your friends?

Professor Ebdon: Yes. I think it is a distinct advantage to know people and to understand where they come from, and for them also to know me and to understand where I come from. So no, I do not see that as being a particular barrier or difficulty. It is certainly small compared with the other challenges there will be. We are seeing the greatest change in higher education that there has been, certainly, in my lifetime, and all of those changes are happening at the same time. That is a very considerable challenge, certainly a much greater one than the fact I know the people I am dealing with.

Q34 Nadhim Zahawi: The Government have stated that they want to see a shift away from assessments of inputs and processes, and a greater focus on clear outputs from access activities. How will you deliver on those aims?

Professor Ebdon: Yes, the challenge is to utilise the high intellectual capacity in our universities to produce challenging targets, underwritten by an understanding of the issues that are there, and then to hold people to those targets. At the moment, there are

two sanctions: one is a £500,000 fine, which is hardly a sanction at all, and the other is to refuse to sign an access agreement. That is a significant sanction, and that is clearly the sanction that one uses. The task is to use the nuclear option with subtlety, and that will be my role.

Q35 Nadhim Zahawi: That takes me nicely on to my next question. How do you think we will be able to judge your influence on the quality of the access arrangements? Will it be how many times you press the nuclear button?

Professor Ebdon: No, hopefully I will never have to press the nuclear button, but once one talks about nuclear buttons, if you then say that you will never press the nuclear button, you do not have a nuclear button, so clearly I would be prepared to do so if people did not agree, but my expectation is that we will be able to agree, through some tough negotiation. I have said that I think making these targets transparent and open will help us, so that people know what they are and we can hold people to account in public. I think the court of public opinion is very powerful.

Q36 Nadhim Zahawi: It certainly is but that also goes back to the fundamental issue, which is that you do not really buy into the policy in the first place, which makes it difficult for you.

Professor Ebdon: I buy into the policy of access, and there is not a difficulty there.

Q37 Nadhim Zahawi: But do you buy into the overall policy?

Professor Ebdon: I would not be sitting here if I thought that was a difficulty. My opinions are probably better known than any other Vice-Chancellor’s. I have still been selected as the preferred candidate. I am not resiling from any of those opinions; everybody knows what they are, but, above all, everybody knows that I am passionate about access. My appointment will give a very clear signal that the Government are serious about the issue of access and social mobility through our universities.

Q38 Nadhim Zahawi: The Government say that “the Director will provide more active and energetic challenge”—I think we have heard some of the ways you are going to do that today, and thank you for that—but also “support to universities and colleges”. How will you deliver both the active challenge and the necessary support? From what I was hearing from you earlier about the patchy performance of the Russell Group, how will support those universities you are clearly critical of?

Professor Ebdon: The most obvious area of support that we must work on is the spreading of good practice. As you say, there is a patchy record, which is another way of saying some institutions have done rather well in the Russell Group and have put a lot of effort and energy into it. For example, one is seeing that summer schools have been extremely valuable in some universities, and that it is understandable in the context of people finding some universities very off-putting and very different. I was struck by the

recent letter published by the young lady who decided to turn down an Oxford college before they turned her down. I was struck very much by the phenomenon, which I think is absolutely true, that in universities we can make ourselves look rather frightening, rather different and rather unwelcoming. We need to work on all of those. Summer school seems to be a good way of giving people that experience and saying, "Actually, it is not that different. We are friendly; we are welcoming; we don't have horns coming out of our head."

Chair: Can we go on to the role and work of OFFA over the next few years? Obviously, you have touched on some of these issues, so you do not need to repeat them. Can I bring in Brian Binley to start?

Q39 Mr Binley: Yes. Professor, what do you see as the key challenges for the Office of Fair Access over the next few years? Where will you place your emphasis?

Professor Ebdon: It would be very much on asking universities to come up with challenging access agreements. For some universities it will be about participation and it will be about the numbers entering those universities; for others it will be about retention of students from a variety of backgrounds. It would be to ask universities, and to work with them, to produce challenging targets, and then to ensure that people achieve the outcomes that they promise. There are some particular short-term challenges: to produce access agreements for part-time students for the first time, as we have only had them for full-time students in the past; to ensure the Government gets good advice as to what should go into any higher education Bill which might be forthcoming in terms of strengthening powers for the Office if necessary; clearly, to establish a function for research and the spreading of good practice amongst universities; and to keep a very strong eye on ensuring that the changes going on do not affect particular groups. There is a great tendency in education for the law of unintended consequences to occur, and suddenly you discover that a policy that you did not think was going to affect one particular group does; you need to keep an eye on that. There are a number of groups—and I have mentioned them already—that are important to monitor.

Q40 Mr Binley: I would have expected anybody who applied for this job to use those very words. What are you going to do to be specifically creative to ensure that your views might impact for the good upon the job that you are working in? I want to hear some creativity and I do not hear very much from the educational establishment, quite frankly. What is your bit of creativity?

Professor Ebdon: If I have succeeded—and obviously I think I have—in the job I have done, it is by releasing the potential that is in people. There is a lot of potential to be released from the sector, first of all by getting a strong commitment to access, translating that into clear targets and then monitoring strongly on outcomes. I think there will be plenty of creativity in there.

Q41 Mr Binley: You said earlier on that every drop-out is a tragedy and one we should do everything to avoid. Can you explain that a little further in relation to the first question I asked? Because not every drop-out is a tragedy; there are people who find themselves not wishing to be a part of the university establishment and, in fact, in business terms, academic qualification is a part of the need but by no means the whole of the need, so why do you see every drop-out a tragedy? Why can't you see it in more positive terms? I do not quite understand that.

Professor Ebdon: It is quite possible to turn adversity into success—and I understand where you are coming from there—but if somebody has struggled hard to get into university, has overcome peer group opposition and maybe even derision, has made considerable personal sacrifices to get into university and then does not achieve the success they originally intended, I think that equates to a personal tragedy.

Q42 Mr Binley: Your thinking should be more widely based. Let me come on to your business record, because you do not have one, and that concerns me immensely in this job. I look through all of your background to date and I see totally an educationist who has become an educational bureaucrat, without being over-rude. I do not see anything that tells me you have an understanding, in the widest sense, of the real world out there, and particularly the world of business. How would you answer that?

Professor Ebdon: I would answer that I have been heavily engaged in economic development. For example, currently, I am a board member of the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership. I was elected by all of the vice-chancellors and principals in the South East Midlands to take on that role because I think they respect my understanding and interactions with business. Of course, universities are, these days, quite a big business. When I went to the University of Luton, as it then was, we had a turnover of £38 million; now it is £128 million a year. I know turnover is not everything, but leftover has improved an awful lot as well, such that we have been able to invest in a capital investment programme of over £180 million in the last few years from our own cash reserves. Borrowings have gone down and not up during that period. So, I think I have run a successful business in terms of the University of Bedfordshire.

Q43 Mr Binley: Professor, I would expect you to be competent. If you were not competent, I would be amazed that you were sitting there, so let us get that out of the way. I am looking for the creativity, the spark, that says to me that is the right man for this job and, to date, you have not provided it. I want to see that spark about what you will do to interrelate with business, which is so important now, to ensure that business is aware of the values of a university and is aware of what universities can do. We have made some progress in this area, but not a great deal when you relate us to the States, for instance. I want to see some creativity in those terms as well. I recognise it is not your prime job—

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Chair: Brian, I would just caution you; that is not really the job spec of the Director of OFFA.

Mr Binley: Forgive me, Chairman. I was about to say I recognise it is not your prime job, Professor, but you are an important member of the educational establishment and you will be moulding thinking, and that is why I want to see an answer from you that gives me more confidence.

Professor Ebdon: Let me give you one reason why business should be very anxious to support access to universities, and that is the key role of diversity in our business. We live in a global economy now, and the ability for UK businesses to understand that global economy will depend upon being able to recruit people of high talent from a wide variety of backgrounds. The diversity that we need to promote in our universities is vital to the diversity we need to promote in our businesses, and I think there is a significant business advantage to be had from following the access and widening participation agenda.

Q44 Mr Binley: Okay. The Government have proposed changes to both the rolling powers of OFFA and to the job of Director of OFFA. What changes do you think are vital to the future effectiveness of the organisation and what changes would be desirable from your perspective? Another very broad question, but it is probing in the same area.

Professor Ebdon: Yes. The power the Director of OFFA has at the moment is quite strong. Perhaps it needs to be articulated a little more, and it certainly needs to be exercised more. I note that the Government have proposed in the White Paper that the Director might instruct institutions on the specific amounts to spend on access or retention. I am not sure that would necessarily be a particularly effective power. In a sense, one already has that by having to agree the access agreements.

I think more flexible sanctions would be helpful. I talked about the nuclear option earlier. A tactical strike option would be helpful as well, so a wider variety of sanctions other than just a plain, "No, I do not agree with that access agreement." I think the proposition in the White Paper of a public assessment of a university's access performance, if the Director feels that is necessary, would also be helpful. It would be right and appropriate that the auditors to carry that out should be agreed between the university and the Director of OFFA.

Q45 Mr Binley: My final question: under your direction, will access agreements consider the relative benefits of bursaries, fee waivers, cost of living support? Here I refer also to the business sector. I think there is an untapped way of widening access in those terms in providing support, as you say, at a difficult time for many graduates from the backgrounds that you so passionately fight for. So, how do you see, under your direction, those things working and being enhanced?

Professor Ebdon: I certainly respect the research that OFFA has already done on the differential impact of those activities on access, and we need to look at the differential impact on retention as well. We tend to

emphasise bursaries at the University of Bedfordshire, because our challenge is on retention rather than on access, and we believe that bursaries have helped our students, because the financial challenge can often be the greatest one they face.

We have also worked closely with business to set up a series of work placements, internships, which are also very valuable in promoting retention, and that is something I would like to see more of as well as a greater interaction with business. I go back to an era when I was in Sheffield, when all of our students did a sandwich placement, and I remember just how tremendously effective that was in promoting success and retention, and how much employers valued it as well. So, it would be good to see a return to that but, of course, there is a clear challenge now with the fee levels and the debt levels, and people turning away from longer degree programmes for the fear of debt. We need to develop new models that encourage better engagement with business and industry for students, without necessarily adding unnecessarily to course length.

Q46 Mr Binley: Many of us feel that area of the tuition fee business has not been properly explained or well understood. Do you see it as your role to explain it more effectively than has been the case in the past?

Professor Ebdon: Absolutely. There has been considerable misunderstanding about how the system works. I am beginning to think from the UCAS figures that the message is getting through to younger students, but not to mature students. Younger students seem to realise that in fact the new arrangements have advantages for those from less-advantaged backgrounds compared with previous arrangements.

Q47 Margot James: You mentioned that there was a lack of a decent evidence base for the barriers to access. I do not know whether you have had a chance to review some of the evidence that was presented to this Committee last year when we reviewed the subject. Based on what you know yourself and what you might have read of our hearings last year, what do you think are the main reasons for the differential between access to Russell Group universities and access to the other universities over the last 10 years?

Professor Ebdon: The biggest difference seems to be the application rate. If students apply to selective universities, admission seems to be independent of their background at that stage. Therefore, the issue is clearly encouraging more students to apply to those universities. From my own personal experience—and I accept it is largely anecdotal from talking to students—they do not see themselves as being part of that community. They do not see those universities as for them, and that seems to me to be the biggest challenge. It may be as simple as, "If you do an interview, make sure you do not do it in a baronial hall; do it in a friendlier atmosphere." Certainly, my mantra is that it is important to make a university feel as welcoming and as friendly as possible to encourage applicants. So I think getting people to consider it a possibility and to aspire to go to such universities is probably their biggest challenge.

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Q48 Margot James: Yes, I accept that point, but I am surprised you do not mention schools and the choice of subjects in a lot of comprehensive schools. In fact, only this week I have heard Professor Alison Wolf, who conducted that major report into vocational education last year, confirm that there was an increasing bias towards vocational equivalent subjects at GCSE, the abandonment of foreign languages, and the preference among a lot of comprehensive schools for just taking a single science at GCSE. All of those problems seemed, to a number of witnesses that we heard from last year, to be a major stumbling block. If children are not taking the sorts of GCSEs that lead to the sorts of A-Levels that the Russell Group accept, surely that is an even more important factor than the one you mentioned, which I do take seriously—that a lot of students from those backgrounds feel that the Russell Group universities are “not for them”.

Professor Ebdon: The point is well made and acknowledged. Indeed, the report of National Council for Educational Excellence, on which I served, does point out the very strong statistical connection between taking three sciences at GCSE and progressing to science subjects at university. Indeed, I gave evidence a couple of weeks ago to another House of Lords inquiry about European Union modernisation in our education, and I drew attention to the challenges from the drop in the number of young people taking languages in schools. So I acknowledge that.

I would also have to say that universities have to deal with the world as it is rather than the world that we would want. Maybe the challenge for universities then is to say, “Given this issue of students coming forward with a different background from the one that maybe we had intended when we set up this course, is there anything we can do to equalise levels?” This was something I was saying came up very strongly in another House of Lords inquiry that I was involved in, and I think it is significant.

I do not think universities can just say, “Oh well, it is because they are doing the wrong GCSEs.” We have to say, “Is there anything we can do, as universities, to influence schools and interact with schools?” We should plead guilty to the fact that we have not done enough in terms of saying, “These are the aspects of mathematics that we need to be in the school curriculum.” I think we have abdicated from that responsibility and we should take it more seriously. We also need to interact with schools more closely and explain what it is that we are looking for, and just putting it on a website, which most of us do, is not enough. Thirdly, I think we need to explore more to see whether that is really an insuperable barrier or whether we are being insufficiently flexible about entry.

Q49 Margot James: What do you think of the guidance that the Russell Group universities have put together to try to influence schools to make students aware at a younger age of the implications of their GCSE choices for their later university prospects?

Professor Ebdon: It is very helpful. Clearly, supply chain issues are very serious ones and ones that the

Director of OFFA has to take seriously. We will not change things overnight, because we have to work back down the line, and I would very much welcome any action that alerts schools to these issues. Even better, of course, is a dialogue with schools to try to find out why it is they have taken the decisions they have, and I hear responses from the schools that they are influenced by league tables. We really need to find out what it is, because these are major obstacles and you are quite right in identifying them as such.

Q50 Margot James: I have two more questions, if I may. Could you just tell us a little bit more about what you mean by “equalising” the prospects of students who have taken subjects that are not really meeting the course requirements for selective universities? How can you, after all those exams have been taken, step in if the inappropriate subject choices have been taken? How would you propose to equalise if you were one of these universities?

Professor Ebdon: There are plenty of subjects that are studied ab initio at university and do not require prior study, so in some subject areas we find that quite possible to do. In other subject areas we say that is not possible to do, and sometimes it is only tradition that makes us say that. It is quite well-established practice in parts of the sector to put things in the first year curriculum that in my day and age at school would have been certainly in the school curriculum and quite possibly in what was then the GCE curriculum and not even the A-Level curriculum. We need to recognise that.

We also need to recognise, of course, that schools have put a lot of additional things into the curriculum, which may or may not be helpful. Clearly, the skills that young people come to university with now in computing and IT are incredibly useful and valuable. Indeed, if one faces a group of mature or international students without the same skills, it is an issue to make sure that they come up to speed and that we do not take it for granted that all students come in with a similar skill set.

Q51 Margot James: Finally, could you clarify what you mean by “targets”? You mentioned challenging access “targets”. The Higher Education Minister said in a letter he wrote to me on this subject that there would not be targets, that there was a clear aim for the organisation of improving access, and it was down to the organisation to ensure that universities were taking appropriate steps towards improving access, but there would not be specific numerical or percentage targets. So I am concerned by your use of the word “targets”, and I wondered if you could clarify that for us.

Professor Ebdon: I quite understand that there will not be specific national targets, and that is inappropriate within a sector with a series of independent, autonomous organisations. But virtually every university that I know, like every business in this country, has a set of targets, a balanced score card, whatever you want to call it, that we are working towards.

Chair: Translated into “aspirations” now.

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Professor Ebdon: I have run a university. You have a series of challenging targets that you set. In my case, I agree with my Board of Governors, and in that way I think I am like almost any other chief executive in the country. Are the targets that have been set by an individual institution for access challenging enough? It is not really just enough to take the benchmark figures that come out of the Funding Council, because they are just averages of current performance, and just bringing everybody up to average is not enough. We have a major challenge in this area, and if we do not take it on—if we lose more ground in this challenge—we will suffer as a nation, in my estimation.

Q52 Rebecca Harris: I am following on from Margot's questions, as this is an area I am interested in as well. In our previous inquiry, quite a lot of us on this Committee were struck by the extent to which we heard that perhaps schools were not always encouraging kids to take the subjects that would be necessary or helpful to get into university, or perhaps not sufficiently discouraging them against taking other subjects. We also found some teachers who did not understand what the new fees regime meant, which I hope is something that will gradually not be the case. There was also quite a lot of anecdotal information that teachers themselves in schools were not necessarily encouraging and giving children the confidence to apply for some of the more competitive universities. I am very worried by that, because if a person you know well, you have a relationship with, and you feel knows you, is not pushing you or confident enough to push you, that has much more impact on an individual's choice than a whole variety of other things. Whether it is a baronial hall that is off-putting or whatever, they will not even get to that stage. I am concerned that, however much you set targets or use a nuclear option, no amount of outreach or summer schools is going to overcome that problem, if it exists. What are your views on that?

Professor Ebdon: I am sure everyone in education will tell you about this concept of self-fulfilling prophecy: you tell a child that they are not very good at something and, lo and behold, they end up not very good at it. It is obvious, it is well known, but it is still done. It is extremely dangerous and it is something that we need to combat. We need to put aspiration back into our schools, and I would be very passionate about that. That is something that I would want to do something about as Director of the Office.

Q53 Rebecca Harris: You think OFFA would have a role in that.

Professor Ebdon: I do, I do. There are a number of interesting initiatives: Speakers for Schools is a very good programme, which will bring a whole variety of people who are recognised as world-class experts in their area into schools. The whole idea is to raise aspiration, to put the excitement back into the school curriculum and to raise up those youngsters who may have been told they are not very good. In fact, one of the greatest delights in education is to take somebody who has been told they are not going to be successful,

that they are not going to achieve and get them to achieve. I have had several PhD students who, at various points in their life, have been told that they are not very good and they are hopeless, and some of them are even professors now.

Q54 Rebecca Harris: Do we need to be telling the pupils they are marvellous, or do we need to say to the teachers, "Look, you really can get your kids into the top universities"? I have a fantastic personal family example: a sister with four grade As at mock A-Level said she wanted to do medicine, and her head said, "Shouldn't you go into nursing?" We would have had an extra great nurse, but we would certainly have been deprived of a really fantastic doctor. My father was the first generation of his family to go to university, and he pushed us. If we had not had him pushing us—and pushing me, saying, "You are good enough to go into politics"—that teacher would have been the primary influence. It was not a teacher who was putting her ability down; it was just not thinking that his pupils could go as far as they could.

Professor Ebdon: It is terribly important and, of course, there is a fair amount of evidence that one of the reasons for underachievement in Afro-Caribbean boys is precisely that phenomenon coupled with a lack of good role models.

Q55 Chair: Can I just briefly pick up this point? I think it has been well made. But I look at my own local authority, Sandwell, and I think over the previous five years only one student got to Oxbridge, even though there has been a substantial increase in the number going to higher education. That does imply considerable cultural difficulties and partly it is parental. Do you see OFFA having a role in ensuring universities try to counter that in their engagement with schools and young people?

Professor Ebdon: Yes, I do and I think it is important. We do not want to have a university system in this country where you have one set of universities for the rich or the advantaged, and one for the poor, nor do we want to further perpetuate the situation where we find universities that have very large numbers of ethnic minority students and others that have very small numbers. This should not be, and it is a path that is fraught with danger, in my opinion.

Q56 Katy Clark: Do you think there is any need for any legislative changes to make the kinds of changes that you think are required and that you have been speaking about, or do you think that you can achieve what you need to achieve through agreements between the Office for Fair Access, the Department and universities?

Professor Ebdon: I think it is possible to achieve a lot under the present administration. I have talked about a switch to outcomes. I have talked about a series of agreements where people are challenged, supported and monitored, and you can achieve a lot with that. In terms of legislation, greater articulation of the powers

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of the Director might be helpful. Probably the most helpful thing would be a range of flexible sanctions. At the moment, there is only the nuclear option, so it would be helpful to have that, but I think that a lot can be achieved under the present powers.

Q57 Katy Clark: Do you think the Office for Fair Access has the resources it needs to monitor these agreements, given that they seem to be increasingly important?

Professor Ebdon: It is early days for me, and therefore I certainly do not want to make a statement now that I might regret when I get into the role and see. I am encouraged by the increase in numbers. I recognise that we are now going to have yearly access agreements, and we need to monitor whether that is the right level of frequency. I think at the moment it certainly is with the major changes going on in higher education. Certainly, previously it would have been possible for a university to hide away, not achieving on its access agreement, for something like five years, which is unacceptable to me, so I think the move to yearly is probably the right thing. That clearly increases the amount of resource required, but that has been provided.

Q58 Katy Clark: The only other thing I was going to ask about is whether you think access agreements, as currently drafted, are sufficient or do they need to be changed in any way. That might be something you would have a view on once you take up the position, but I suspect you probably already have some thoughts on that.

Professor Ebdon: My disadvantage, of course, is that I have not seen a lot of other people's access agreements; I know our access agreement. It will be helpful to have them as open and transparent documents. It will be helpful to see people set challenging targets in there, and I do not know whether the current targets are challenging enough. In terms of what has happened in recent years, probably we could do with a little bit more challenge in those agreements.

Q59 Simon Kirby: I have been looking at your CV, which I understand would not be appropriate for me to mention in this Committee, but can I ask if you are still a board member of the Universities and Colleges Employers Association?

Professor Ebdon: I am at the moment, yes.

Q60 Simon Kirby: Would it be your intention, if appointed, to relinquish that role?

Professor Ebdon: Yes.

Q61 Simon Kirby: What would you say to people who might think that this was another conflict of interest?

Professor Ebdon: It certainly would be impossible to be both, and I would not seek that. I hold a number of roles, such as Chair of million+, board member of UCEA, board member of UUK—a whole series of things that I hold because I am a Vice-Chancellor. When I cease to be a Vice Chancellor, I automatically cease those roles as well.

Q62 Nadhim Zahawi: Professor Ebdon, perception is reality and you obviously have been a great leader of your university and passionate in your views on how higher education should be run. I guess your reputation in the industry precedes you, and the perception of where you stand on all this stuff is out there. What can you say to this Committee to reassure us on two things that I think are at the heart of this? One is that you can promote the strength of the arguments in the face of opposition, which is one of the key skills—to communicate persuasively and publicly with excellent presentation skills to get to a stage where you can overcome maybe some of the perceptions about your own opinions that are passionately held. Two, you are going to have a pretty powerful platform with this appointment. How can you reassure this Committee that you will remain focused on the task at hand and not be tempted, because we are all human beings, to use that platform to effectively promote your own vision of how we ought to run education in this country versus what you need to do, which is effectively deliver on the task that is before you? How will you remain—

Chair: I think we get the message.

Professor Ebdon: I am quite clear that, if I take on this role, I will no longer be able to comment on a wide range of educational issues. I have only done so at the moment because I am a Vice-Chancellor and I believe it has been appropriate for me to comment on those issues in the interests of my university and my students. I will not miss commenting on those. If I wanted to carry on commenting on a wide range of educational issues after I retire as a Vice-Chancellor, I should either seek election to this place or perhaps become a journalist!

Mr Binley: That really has lost you the job! [Laughter] If you think being in here is good, that is the end of it!

Chair: Thank you very much. I think that concludes the questioning; a pretty rigorous working over, I think. If you would like to retire, we will now sit in private to go through whatever formal procedures we need to go through. Thank you very much.

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ISBN 978-0-215-04301-6

