5 April 2018

Dear Robert

Response to questions from the 27 March Education Select Committee hearing

Thank you for inviting me to give evidence to your committee’s inquiry into value for money in higher education. It was a privilege to engage with you and your members in a robust and open dialogue, and I look forward to reading and learning from the committee’s report later this year.

During the session I committed to writing to you about how we intend to include and take account of the perspectives of the further education sector as we deliver our new regulatory regime.

As I stated to the committee, I recognise and agree with the clear message that was delivered on the importance of representation from the further education sector in our operations. I outline our current and planned activity in this area in this letter.

There is currently one vacancy on the OfS’s board and the Department for Education (DfE) will also be appointing a full-term student experience board member, following the interim appointment of Ruth Carlson (who is doing an excellent job in her role). The OfS will welcome high-quality applications from candidates from the further education sector during all recruitment exercises to the board. The first opportunity for applicants will arrive when the DfE launches a new campaign for the student experience board member this month. Following this, regardless of whether the newly appointed student representative has a further education background or not, we will continue to welcome high-quality applications from people with experience of the further education sector when the DfE launch their recruitment campaign for the current ‘ordinary member’ board vacancy. As set out in the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), decisions about the board appointments will, ultimately, be made by the Secretary of State for Education.
The committee asked about the representation of students with experience of further education in the OfS. We are currently developing our comprehensive student engagement strategy and we will be working with students and sector bodies in order to understand how best to take account of the full range of student perspectives in our work. Whilst we clearly have further to go it may reassure the committee that we have included students with experience of further education in our student panel, a body established in January to advise the OfS. Shakira Martin, the newly re-elected President of the National Union of Students (NUS) is a full member of the panel and plays an important role as a graduate of, and advocate for, the further education sector. In addition, we have appointed another member of the student panel with experience of both further education and apprenticeships. We expect to be held to account by all of our student panel members and value the full range of their experiences and expertise.

Whilst still in the early stages of our existence, our chief executive, Nicola Dandridge, has started to engage with the further education sector. Both Nicola and OfS officials meet regularly with the Association of Colleges and the Mixed Economy Group and Nicola has spoken at both organisations’ recent conferences, where she committed publically to working constructively with the further education sector. We have also established a strong working relationship with NUS elected officers and officials, who represent students in higher and further education. We will continue to consult this group of stakeholders to establish how best to engage with the further education sector, taking on board your suggestion of setting up a working group of further education representatives.

Finally, I would like to add one unrelated clarification. Whilst making a point about the challenge of combining transparency and privacy I was unable to give a direct answer to a specific question about whether the OfS will publish its minutes. I can confirm that we will be publishing our minutes and indeed, wherever possible, our board papers. Minutes and papers from our January and March meetings will be uploaded to the Office for Students’ website shortly.

Once again, many thanks to you and the committee for the dialogue on the 27 March.

Yours sincerely

Sir Michael Barber
Chair, Office for Students