IOP Institute of Physics

The Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith St
London
SW1P 3BT

2 March 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

On behalf of the Institute of Physics (IOP), I write to share our position on the government's response to the Augar review.

To summarise:

- The IOP welcomes the provisions made for strengthening technical education.
- The government should progress high-value technical education at the same time as progressing high-value university education.
- We are concerned by the government's plan to limit those who are eligible to receive student loans, particularly prospective students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The IOP aims to build a thriving, diverse physics community and play our part in solving the STEM skills shortage by ensuring that all people in the UK and Ireland, no matter their background or where they live, have access to world-class physics education and training.

We are strongly supportive of the Prime Minister's ambition to make the UK a 'science superpower' and believe that requires a system which empowers everyone to gain the right skills for the future economy. To meet these aims, the UK must improve accessibility and take-up of post-18 education as a whole and ensure that it delivers against UK physics needs in a sustainable, cost-effective way. We therefore welcome the driving aims of the Augar review.

The IOP recognises that public spending alone will not meet the government's objectives in response to the Augar review. We also recognise that technical education has been historically under-supported in the UK in comparison to G7 economies, while at the same time public funding for higher education has increased.

A recent study commissioned by the IOP demonstrated that more than half of physics-demanding jobs do not require a higher education qualification. The IOP therefore welcomes the innovative provisions being made for strengthening technical education.

The IOP, however, is concerned about the perception of technical education and higher education positioned against each other – with increased support for one justified at the expense of the other. We consider higher and technical education each playing important and complementary roles in society. The government should progress high-value technical education at the same time as progressing high-value university education.

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While IOP supports measures to limit the number of low value courses, there is a risk that these measures may inadvertently damage high value routes. For example, high value courses like physics are often costly to run. Measures that heighten financial pressures on universities, without specific support to high-value courses may result in institutional decisions to stop offering subjects like Physics. This would be a negative outcome for both students, the Government's own objectives and the UK.

Recent work by the IOP into the issues affecting the financial sustainability of Physics departments has highlighted that the funding of research and teaching are interconnected. We are concerned that the tuition fee cap could impact the international standing of UK universities, and that international students may be put off from studying in the UK due to increased fees and reduced international rankings.

One of the core objectives of the IOP is to promote equality, diversity and inclusion within the physics community, both in terms of opportunities and demonstrated outcomes. Our Limit Less campaign aims to improve access and participation in physics. To that end, we are concerned by the government's plan to limit those who are eligible to receive student loans. The government's own figures demonstrate this will hit the most disadvantaged students the hardest.

We are keen to continue a constructive dialogue around the Augar review and to ensure that all students, further and higher education institutes, and the UK economy benefit from reforms to the system. Moreover, the IOP is already taking forward recommendations found in the review through our work on technical skills. To that end, I would like to extend an invitation to meet and discuss the points raised in this letter along with providing evidence and expert advice on the implementation of the review's recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

Rachel Youngman
Deputy Chief Executive

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