

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW

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DAMIAN HINDS

AM: Can I ask you first of all about this new review on university tuition fees? Is everything on the table?

DH: Well, we've got a very strong higher education sector in this country, and the system that's in place, been in place since 2012, has been very effective in making sure that our universities are properly funded, world class.

AM: Then why review it?

DH: Competes. But also it's been fair in terms of the split in cost between taxpayer and student. And there's also more disadvantaged students going to university than ever before. But –

AM: So it's working, it's effective, it's fair, but we're going to look at it again.

DH: To address your question of why a review. When this system was brought in it wasn't anticipated that so many universities, so many courses, would all have the same fee for their course. There hasn't been as much variety that has come into the system as we would have expected and wanted. So I think it's right to ask questions about that and see what can be done to stimulate that diversity and variety.

AM: So is it true that as a result of this some courses, for instance in the humanities, in English and history and other things, it will become cheaper?

DH: Well, I don't think politicians are going to be setting the costs and the prices for different courses and all forms of education, all courses, all subjects have great value, have great worth. What we need to look at is the different aspects of the pricing. So the cost that it is to put on the course, the value that it is to the student. And also the value to our society as a whole and to our economy for the future. There are some subjects, some areas, both in

higher education and in technical education where we we're going to need more of those coming forward in the future because of the changes, because of the new challenges in the world economy.

AM: I'm now puzzled. You look at this, then what do the universities do as a result of the review? How are these things going to change if it's not the government imposing any kind of change?

DH: Well, it would be wrong to pre-empt the review. The review will review. There's going to be an independent panel that will look at these different aspects of how students decide where to study and what the costs are to put on those different courses, and looking at some of these subjects that we need for the future. They will make recommendations, the government will then act.

AM: If you're a student or a prospective student watching this, or a parent of a student, you'd be very, very interested in the cost of these courses, the tuition fees. Is it possible as a result of this that you're going to look again at the very, very high interest rates and the maximum cost of tuition fees, maximum price tag and how long students get to pay them back? Are those things on the table?

DH: Well, I mean, you talk about the maximum price tag, and of course there's some courses where £9,250 a year in fees is a very, very good deal indeed. And what the interest rate does is it makes the system more progressive. It means people who earn a lot of money in their twenties and thirties will contribute more than others.

AM: Okay, are these things being reviewed or not?

DH: Well, the independent panel will look at this and then government will respond. But the panel of course can look at these different aspects, and the Treasury Select Committee report, which has also just come out, makes the point that, that

you know, we shouldn't think about student debt in quite the same way as another debt. We need to think also about the way that these things come across to students when they're making decisions.

AM: So things like the interest rate might change as a result of this review?

DH: Well, we can't pre-empt –

AM: No, I'm just asking. I said might.

DH: You absolutely can't look at one aspect of the system in isolation from the others. They all play –

AM: I'm just trying to discover whether this is a real review which is actually going to change things or not.

DH: It is a real review.

AM: And things will change?

DH: And what we are looking to do is to make sure that there's the variety and there's the choice in higher education that would-be students have full visibility of what those options are. And also that they know about the progressive elements that are there –

AM: And so for instance, are you – does the review cover alternatives to the current system of paying for students at university? Does it – would it cover, for instance, a different kind of graduate tax? Would that be up for grabs? Would it be possibly a tax, people have suggested, on all graduates, a modest tax to pay for universities? Is that on the table?

DH: Well, right now we have a hybrid scheme actually, it's got elements of a loan system and elements of a graduate contribution scheme, and things like the interest rate, the earnings threshold, so already you don't pay anything if you're not earning over £21,000. That's soon going to go up to £25,000. So it is a hybrid system. But will the review look at alternatives?

Yeah, absolutely. Because this is a review, not only about higher education and universities, it's about tertiary education as a whole. And that includes non-university routes and we're already

making big reforms with T-levels and so on. And we also need to think about how that works post-18.

AM: It is possible that the current system of tuition fees could end as a result of this review?

DH: Well, we think it's right that if you benefit from a university degree you should make a contribution, and that is what this current system does. What we're doing in the review is looking at how that system works, making sure that there are alternatives, making sure there's more variety, and that could include lower cost ways of delivering education, which might be shorter courses, which also means less time out of the labour market, more opportunities to work, you know, to study while you work, and so on.

AM: Are you looking again at maintenance grants? Because for an awful lot of poorer students that is the real issue. They arrive at the end with their kind of £55-56,000 debt, of which roughly speaking half is the grant to pay for a roof over their head, eating while they're out. That's an awful lot of money. And many people think that is a real disincentive to many students staying on at university and therefore you should look at bringing back maintenance grants, not maintenance loans.

DH: Well, having maintenance loans has meant that students can get more access to more money to help with the cost of living.

AM: And more debt.

DH: But of course we must also remember that when we talk about these large numbers – and I do appreciate how that appears and I can appreciate the concerns that people have – but actually a lot of people will never pay off that full amount of money. That's a deliberate feature of the system, that if you don't earn over – soon to be £25,000 you won't be paying back at all. And if you get to the end of the 30 years without it all being paid off it is then written off.

AM: Are you looking at maintenance grants again or not?

DH: The review is looking at all aspects of tertiary education and funding.

AM: Sam Gyimah, the Universities Minister, said, 'as I speak to students I can feel their pain.' Do you feel their pain?

DH: Well, it depends what you mean by feeling their pain.

AM: On maintenance grants, he was looking at particularly.

DH: I think when you're looking at a large figure in terms of an accumulated financial liability when you're leaving university, of course I can understand why that could feel difficult. We need to make sure that even in the current system people are aware that there are, you know – you're not going to be repaying unless you meet a certain threshold. But let's come back to, you know, the whole point of this is to look at all of these elements in the system to make sure there is variety of choice, to make sure the system is as fair as it can be and is value for money for everybody.

AM: Labour would bring back maintenance grants. This feels like tinkering.

DH: This certainly isn't what you say. This is a full look at the whole of tertiary education, at the university sector but also at the technical and the alternatives to university. Including things like degree apprenticeships and also the whole variety there is in technical education.

AM: You went to a Roman Catholic Grammar school. Theresa May was very, very clear at the start of her premiership that she wanted new grammar schools to restart. Is that going to happen on your watch?

DH: Well, what we are looking at is about the existing grammar schools.

AM: So no.

DH: And schools in general where there is demand from parents and they're providing a good education, there's a need in the area, schools in general can expand to take on more pupils.

AM: That's not what I'm asking. With respect that's not what I'm asking.

DH: No, no. And I appreciate that, but I'm saying what we are looking at in terms of numbers. So what I'm looking at is how, for selective schools, those same options to expand are these as for other schools.

AM: But you are not going to reopen the issue about opening new grammar schools. You once said you wanted a selective school in every conurbation or every small town. That's not going to happen. New grammar schools are not going to be reopened on your watch?

DH: That is not what we're doing. We're talking about being able to being able to expand –

AM: Why not?

DH: to be able to expand existing schools.

AM: Why not?

DH: Well, there are already quite a few – quite a few grammar schools, selective schools in the country but they're a small minority of the total – 21 and a half thousand schools in the country, there's about 160 which are selective. Actually we've got a big variety in terms of our schools. Free Schools, Academies, maintained schools, comprehensive intakes, selective intakes and they all have – they all have a place.

AM: You still haven't told me why you're not going to bring back new grammar schools.

DH: Well, I'm focused on making sure we have good – we have good school places available in all places. There are some parts of the country which have an established system with selective education and those – in those places those schools should be

able to expand if there's need and if there's parental demand and they're providing good education.

AM: You want to make it easier for parents to take their children out of sex education lessons. No?

DH: No. There's already an established right to take your children out of the sex education lessons. What we're doing in is bringing in relationship education in primary school and relationship and sex education in secondary school and those lessons will be in all schools.

AM: And it will be compulsory?

DH: It will be compulsory to have them in all schools but as I say there is an established right which will continue for parents to be able to withdraw their children from the sex education bit of relationships and sex education. Not in the science curriculum, but in relationships and sex education that right exists and will continue. That was made absolutely clear when the legislation was going through parliament.

AM: Again my simple question is why? You know you look at today's front pages and all the issues over Me Too and the treatment of women and different things, actually issues like consent, relationship issues are at the core of what has gone wrong in a lot of our culture. Surely it should be absolutely mandatory for all children to learn the basics of this while at school?

DH: Well I think there are unprecedented pressures on today's children and young people. I mean in many ways it is the best time yet to be young but there are these new pressures and partly to do with the internet and cyber bullying and so on and that is why we are bringing in these relationships education in primary school and relationships and sex education in secondary.

AM: Schools around the country are facing really, really severe budget problems, as you know. Parents are being asked to pay for books and all sorts of things. We went to one primary school in your own constituency which is - and we talked to somebody there. It's the Liss Infants School and we talked to a woman called Victoria Granger whose six year old son's there and she said losing the teaching assistants, they're losing teaching assistants for primary one and two every afternoon. She said, losing these teaching assistants has made a real difference to the children. The teachers don't have time to pay the same attention to them as they did before, we're relying on parents to step in to make sure they don't lose out too much. I am apolitical, she says, but I am concerned about the way things are going. What's your message to her?

H: Well I pay tribute to everybody who works in our schools and does that incredible job that you've just outlined. There is more money going into schools than ever before. £41 billion, going to be rising to 43 and a half billion –

AM: Not in real terms.

DH: - over the last couple – over the next couple of years so actually funding will be held in real terms over that period. We've found an extra £1.3 billion to be able to do that. But there are cost pressures, I do recognise that and that's why you know we're working harder than ever with schools to help them on some of those cost pressures.

AM: The Institute of Education says the biggest problem on your table is the retention and recruitment of teachers. The number of teachers leaving the profession has been going up. It's been very, very hard to get teachers into teacher training colleges, 30% down this year. Why is that happening do you think?

DH: Well there are still more teachers joining the profession than leaving. 32,000 last year and there are more teachers in our

schools now than there were. 15,000 more teachers than 2010. It is still a – it's a great profession, I think a lot of people have that vocation to go into teaching and are continuing to do it. It's still actually one of the top destinations for top graduates at university.

AM: Nearly 5% of teachers are leaving though which is a new rate. I'm just wondering why?

DH: You're also right that you know we need to do more on recruitment and indeed on retention. I know workload is a significant issue for teachers and I'm determined to do everything that we can on that.

AM: I must move on to one last final thing. The university strikes are coming up quite soon and of course lots of students will lose education as result of that. Should they get a rebate because they have lost education?

DH: Well I think nobody wants to see the sort of disruption that we're talking about and I do hope this dispute will be resolved. I mean that's the outcome that we want.

AM: Should they get a rebate?

DH: But if it isn't, I mean students you know, we've been talking about the student finance system, students take out loans to invest in themselves, to invest in their education. They have rights also as consumers you know universities are autonomous.

AM: University should pay them back some money if they don't get the education.

DH: Universities are autonomous institutions. It's for them to make these decisions, but I would expect that that will be taken into account.

Ends