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Dear Dr Martin

Archbishop of Canterbury – degree awarding powers

I am writing to clarify the circumstances in which the Archbishop of Canterbury holds degree awarding powers (DAPs) and the role of the Office for Students (OfS) in overseeing such powers.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 gives the OfS express powers to vary or revoke authorisation for DAPs. These powers apply irrespective of how a provider originally received authorisation for DAPs, including where authorisation was granted under an Act or Royal Charter. This power therefore applies to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has DAPs by virtue of the Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1533 and awards degrees as the Archbishop's Examination in Theology (AET) following a course of study, supervised research or examination.

As a general principle, the OfS expects providers that already hold DAPs to be registered because having organisations with such powers operating outside of the regulated system would be a risk for students and the reputation of English degrees and universities. The OfS may therefore revoke DAPs if a provider that holds these powers does not register or is deregistered.

However, the Office for Students Board decided in March 2019 that it would not seek to revoke the Archbishop's degree awarding powers. This decision took into account the Archbishop's long-standing unique position in the higher education sector and the fact that the degree awarding powers had been continuously in use over an extended period but that the OfS was not aware of any information suggesting there were concerns around how these powers were used.

We would not expect to revisit this matter unless there were relevant changes to our regulatory framework, material changes to the Archbishop's approach to awarding degrees, or evidence was presented to us that raised significant concerns about the appropriateness of how these powers are used in practice.

During the consultation on the OfS's regulatory framework it was envisaged that a 'Registered: Basic' category of registration would exist with very limited regulatory requirements, and we understand that the Archbishop had intended to seek registration in this category. If, in the future, the OfS creates another registration category that it considers may be appropriate for registration of the Archbishop, this might prompt the OfS to revisit its judgement on this matter.

While the Archbishop retains his ability to award degrees, he has not registered with the OfS and this means that the OfS has not reached a judgement about whether the conditions of registration may be satisfied. The Archbishop is not therefore able to access the benefits of registration, such as access to student loan funding. In particular, the OfS's decision not to revoke DAPs does not constitute the OfS making a judgement on quality and standards.

While the above refers to degrees that are awarded following a course of study, supervised research or examination, I also note that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 directly addresses in Section 55 the power of the Archbishop to grant degrees, otherwise than pursuant to a course of study or programme of research, or after examination or other assessment.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Smy', written in a cursive style.

David Smy
Director of Monitoring and Intervention