

## **Oxford Road Chat – 24 October 2024**

**Duncan Ivison, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Manchester**

**Elliot Briffa, City and Communities Executive Officer, University of Manchester Students' Union**

### **CLIP ONE**

Duncan: So what's your day like? What does the role actually involve?

Elliot: I mean, so I, I've been focusing a bit more on sort of talking to students directly, not really doing as many meetings with the university. If I'm City and Community, it's kind of like external officer in a sense.

Duncan: Right, right, right.

Elliot: I'm not really as, sort of –

Duncan: That's probably a relief in some ways.

Elliot: Yes, oh, talking to Lexie and the amount of meetings she has to sit in, I certainly don't envy her.

Duncan: Actually, speaking of Lexie, here she is right here.

Elliot: Oh, there we go.

Duncan: And so who have you been talking to in terms of, is it students, community groups?

Elliot: Yeah, a lot of students, sort of particularly the political ones, because that's the sort of, you know, background I came into the role from. Over the next couple weeks, I'm looking to reach out to some of the religious societies on campus because, I mean, they make up such a sizable part of our students.

Duncan: Some of the largest?

Elliot: Yeah, yeah, Islamic Society is the largest. By quite a hefty distance as well. Has there been anything you've been focussing on this week?

Duncan: This week? Gosh, yeah. I mean, doing a lot of strategy work. So we had a Town Hall yesterday, which is the third one we've done. We had a great dinner on the night before with all the colleagues who've won teaching awards to ask them about, you know, what we should be doing in the teaching and learning space in relation to our strategy. And then we had an SLT meeting on Tuesday. We're starting to think about next year and the planning around that. So yeah, pretty full on.

Duncan: And there's a lot going on in the sector, you know. We've got the budget next week with the government. So, what are we expecting there? There's been some last minute issues around research funding that everyone is a bit worried about. So it's been a mixture of intensely local on campus stuff with national stuff.

Elliot: I saw recently you'd written an article about the sort of education system in this country.

Duncan: Yeah, yeah..

Elliot: Sort of, signalling a desire to see it move away from full marketisation?

Duncan: So I did an interview with the Times Higher and Chris Havergal, who's the journalist asked me, you know, how do you see the future of the UK higher Ed sector? And look, I've only been here in the role three months, so you know, I'm still learning. But I feel really strongly that the UK has had this intense focus on seeing the higher ed sector as essentially a market and therefore seeing higher education as about creating conditions where institutions compete with each other to provide a better experience for the student or, or whatever. I just think I think we need to look at the higher end sector as a system rather than purely as a market. And that means I think universities should be looking to collaborate more deeply than they have before, probably. I mean Manchester's fantastic culture of collaboration between all the universities, that's fantastic. But I think we need to do this in a kind of systematic way. And a lot of the, so what's trying to argue is a lot of the financial challenges, a lot of the structural challenges, government sector, that's probably really the only solution in some cases, right? There's not going to be a huge amount of new investments in higher ed anytime soon. So we're going to have to figure out how to work together more effectively and give our students, you know, a chance to take advantage of, you know, when institutions can collaborate, how does that benefit them, right? How does it benefit you? So that that's the sort of general philosophical pitch, right? I think I think there has been this real focus on competition and I think we're now moving into the era of collaboration. It doesn't solve everything, but that's I think that's got to be part of the solution, actually.

Elliot: But it it wouldn't be, in your view, the right time to call for the end of tuition fees for students?

Duncan: No, so I, look, I, you know –

Off screen voice: The bus is coming.

Duncan: Oh the bus is coming?

Elliot: Oh yeah.

Duncan OK. What are we getting on?

Elliot: Any 4, any 4.

## **CLIP TWO**

Duncan: So yeah, look, I don't think this is the time to be calling for the abolition of tuition fees. I mean, I guess I have a general view that however you fund education, higher education, it's going to involve contributions from students, the government and the higher ed institutions, right? Because I think there are benefits that the students receive, there are benefits that society receives, and there's a contribution that the University needs to make. And I think you need to weigh up the fact that still what less than half of the general population either goes to university or has a university degree. Now, of course we want to see that increase and we want to make it more accessible than it has ever been before, and that's really important, but I don't, I really, I don't think tuition fees are the number one barrier. I think maintenance, the cost of going to university is really, I think significant and we've, we've got to fix that. I mean, it's entirely loan based now and the loan itself has been frozen, as you know, and that's a really serious issue. But I think when you weigh up what the government's faced with: funding health funding social care, funding social housing, the argument for abolishing tuition fees, I just think politically is not very powerful. But I also think there's a kind of, I do think it, I do think of it as a sort of partnership between the three, you know, you, I benefit by going to university, so there's a

contribution that I think is reasonable for me to make. Having said that, I don't think anyone should pay upfront for tuition fees. I'm a big fan of the income contingent loan scheme. You should really only pay it back when your, your wage gets to a certain level and those who are earning more should pay it back more quickly, etcetera. So I think it's a, you know, I think progressive taxation is essentially the way you should pay for higher ed. And I think that the contingent loan scheme basically does that. I mean, there are different ways of doing it. You know, people talk about grant taxes and things like that. So there's a good debate there, but no, I'm not in favour of abolishing tuition fees.

Elliot: Are you concerned by the recent change to the way tuition fees are paid back, by the previous government?

Duncan: So as far as I understand it, yeah, I mean some of the tweaks – I agree, there's a good debate to be had there. And it's quite interesting comparing where I've come from in Australia with the UK and you know, I don't, I mean, I think at the end of the day, they're, they're roughly similar. But in Australia, you know, the, the interest rates are that are not as they're not here either, but you know, the thresholds are maybe a bit higher. I mean, there's tweaks between the two. So I'm sure there are things we can, well, I know there are things we can improve. And how students pay their loans back and when I think the maintenance grant, maintenance loan issue is the biggest one for me.

Elliot: I mean on maintenance loan and I mean when we're down in Fallowfield, we'll talk a bit more about rent and stuff. But do you feel that the maintenance loan has effectively become a subsidy for landlords at this point where students are sending the vast majority, if not for many students, all of their maintenance loans directly to their landlords in rent? And that includes the university where they rent from the university. Is it not in effect maintaining landlords rather than maintaining students?

Duncan: Well, the students use somewhere to live, right, so accommodation is going to be a huge part of the cost of going to university, no question about it. And the, the problem is, is maintenance loans have stayed the same, but costs everywhere else have grown, right? So, it's inevitable that accommodations are going to take more and more of the proportion of student maintenance loans. And, and I agree, we need to fix the maintenance loan system now. So sure, the most expensive thing students face now in terms of their living costs is accommodation, especially in Manchester, especially in London where you know, rents are rising so quickly for a whole range of reasons. But the problem, the problem isn't that it's all going to landlords, The problem is that it's fixed and therefore it's taking more inflation is meaning that it's more and more of the costs are being consumed by it.

Elliot: But if maintenance loan was increased, what would there be to stop landlords basically just saying, hey, I'd like that money, you've got that, I'd like that.

Duncan: Yeah, I mean, it's not connected to the maintenance loan it's obviously connected to the market. So the challenge we've got is ensuring we've got the right mix of student housing available for students to access, right. And we don't have enough student housing in Manchester. We know that there's an undersupply of of beds. Now, the other thing is, of course, there's no one single type of student and students will have different, you know, needs and have different desires for where they want to live and how they want to live. So you're always going to need a diversity of accommodation. But the bottom line is maintenance grants have been fixed. Maintenance loans, sorry, have been fixed for too long. Costs have gone

up and it's inevitable that rent is going to take more and more of what students get through their loans. We need to increase the amount of accommodation that's available. And that's inevitably going to be diverse kinds of accommodation. The fact that, you know, it's a, you know, it's a market. So landlords are going to have to, you know, make decisions about what they what they charge according to what, you know, the market is telling them. But as a university, we can make decisions about building accommodation that is more affordable than students would otherwise have access to on the open market, that's for sure.

Elliot: Do you agree with, so over the past couple of years, the university has began subletting accommodation from private companies. That doesn't increase the stock of accommodation in the city. And what's happened is that where students have gotten it from the university, they're paying £10 a week more than if they've gone directly to the provider. Is that not pushing the rents?

Duncan: Look, I mean, fair, fair, fair comment. I mean, I'd need to understand more how we do that. I'm assuming we sublet accommodation because we don't have enough and it's a way of getting more accommodation available for students because we don't have enough on offer ourselves. I assume that's why we're doing it.

Elliot: That's the argument, it came from the year when students were ending up in Liverpool.

Duncan: So, we're not in that situation now. And I, I'm not aware of us having to, you know, I, I remember reading about this before I came that students were, you know, living in Liverpool or in hotels or hostels and things because the supply was so, so little available. Now we're not in that situation now, as I understand it. I think that almost all of the accommodation we're providing is, is through our accommodation stock. But when we do sublet or take stock from private providers, yeah, I'm assuming it's just a way of, of actually giving students housing.

Elliot: And would they not be able to get that – that housing already exists – by subletting it, the university isn't actually increasing in stock.

Duncan: No, you're right. Absolutely, that's right. Which is why we need to be investing in Fallowfield.

### **CLIP THREE**

Elliot: Bloody expensive. It was £164 a week when I was there. I can't remember the exact number for this year, I think it's over £180 something. It was an increase of about £1,000 a year. And just the two years after I was living there, it went up by £1,000 right. Which is just huge. I couldn't afford to live there anymore.

### **CLIP FOUR**

Duncan: So I think the challenges, as I, as I was saying before, there's no one single student, right? So some students will want. So I lived in something like Oak House when I was an undergrad. It was a cinder block, non all suite box basically. And it was the cheapest accommodation because that's kind of what I could afford and I was reasonably comfortable with that. Of course, today some students want en suites, Some students want to live in, you know, more basic accommodation. Some students want to live in flats where there's 8 or 9 or 10 of them sharing facilities. So we've got to figure out how we provide accommodation for a much more diverse group, I think of students than perhaps even 10 years ago. And how do we do that in a reasonably affordable way? So there, there isn't like a single kind of accommodation that

will meet everyone's needs and everyone's sort of taste. So how do we do that in a reasonable way, how we do it in a way that either doesn't bankrupt the student and doesn't bankrupt the university. I think that's the challenge. The balance we've, we've got a sort of strike.

Elliot: I mean, one, one of the things that we are quite regularly hearing from students when it comes to the choices of accommodation is the way that accommodation is allocated at the university. Before you come, you select 5 that you would deem acceptable.

Duncan: Then how do you find out about that? You go online?

Elliot: You go on the website, yeah.

Duncan: And we've got lots of photographs and descriptions and all that stuff?

Elliot: Yeah, yeah. And then, yeah, you select your five and then you randomly get assigned one accommodation. It actually isn't always necessarily that five, right. A lot of a lot of the times we get we get students who have put specifically like that they wanted to be in the cheapest and they've ended up in the most expensive. Students who put the most expensive and ended up in the cheapest. It doesn't seem to work. And also there's the fact that actually when you're making those decisions, you know, six months before you you're coming to university. Some people are 17 at that point. They've never lived on their own. They don't actually know what it's going to be like. They're also, when they see the amount of money on the website, because it's done in weeks, it looks kind of small when you you know, you see a £160.

Duncan: Yeah? They don't take the full consequence of it in mind? I mean, there must, I assume there's some kind of like algorithm that the university uses to allocate students. And I'm assuming that we are, I don't know for a fact, but I'm assuming that we are like massively oversubscribed for accommodation or we definitely were a couple years ago.

Elliot: We definitely were, a couple years ago. I'm not quite sure –

Duncan: So I assume we are because in general there isn't enough student accommodation in Manchester. Ourselves and MMU are pretty large institutions, and we're probably even larger, so we know that students are pressed to find accommodation. And as I said, we also know now that students have lots of varying tastes and interests and desires when it comes to the kind of accommodation they want to live in. So, yeah, I can see that that's a problem. I can see that that's a challenge for us to allocate and meet everyone's, I guess, desires. I mean, I think the fundamental thing for me is we, we need to provide as affordable accommodation as we can. Yeah, without, like I said, without either, so that it's within reasonable reach of the vast majority of our students and it doesn't cause financial stress to the university. And the challenge we've got is in a city that's where land is expensive, labour costs are expensive, building anything is super expensive, where demand is outstripping supply. How do we, you know, how do we do that? And you know, looking at the way that the accommodation sort of provision is run here, looking at the new investment we're making, look, I'm sure, I'm sure we can argue about this, but I think we're, we're, it's, I think there's a reasonable balance being struck, but it's a, it's a time of rising cost, no question about it.

Elliot: Have the supply issues in terms of there, you know, I'm not sure of the numbers myself. So I don't, can't say whether there is or isn't a definite housing shortage for students, but if there is one.

Duncan: So, there is. I mean, all the evidence I've seen are not just our numbers, I mean every piece of data I've seen, whether it's from, you know, the higher ed sector, from the local sort of housing sector, from the construction industry, etcetera. There's no question.

Elliot: I mean, I, I say that only because, you know, there's a sort of narrative in the country that there is a general housing shortage. But in reality we actually have 1.2 million more homes than the households. It's a distribution issue.

Duncan: Right, right, right, right, right. I think with student housing though, that's, that's a general issue with housing and that's yeah, of course there's has, I don't, I don't think, you know, I don't think there's a lot of empty housing in Manchester being left vacant by Russian tycoons that we could sort of confiscate, you know.

Elliot: Has those issues around housing shortages been caused by universities in Manchester taking on too many students and not being able to actually provide for them? Particularly taking in too many international students, which they are not supporting enough, they are not providing for enough with the expectation that international students pay higher fees to the university to get more money?

Duncan: So no, I mean, I think I, so I don't think we've taken on too many students.

Elliot: But the University has taken on more students than there is housing for?

Duncan: I think the goal is you want to, if you're increasing your student load, then you do need to be increasing your accommodation and we're doing that. Could the university have done it more quickly? Should it have been investing earlier? Look, I think that's a reasonable claim. I mean, I, I wasn't here. I certainly think that if as a university you're increasing your student population, you've got to be investing in accommodation, no question. I think that is absolutely the case. And so that's why I think we're putting on by the end of this development another close to 1000 beds. And you know, we're able to provide a lot of accommodation for our students as a result of that. But as a general proposition, no, I don't think there are too many students at the University of Manchester, I don't think.

Elliot: But if there aren't enough beds for them?

Duncan: Well, I mean, like I said, I mean, it's not every student's going to want to live in university provided accommodation, but we need to provide a reasonable amount to cater for those who do. I think we're getting there. It's not perfect, but we're getting there. And don't forget, the other thing we need to do is provide support. So the Res Life support, all the student services, the work that the Students Union does, we don't just want students to come onto campus and we put them in a flat and say see you later, we actually want to provide them with a reasonable amount of support. Again, I think the university has been doing that and we need to do more of it. I have a particular interest in how we support international students because I think when I listen to them since arriving, you know, again, international students, people talk about them in a very simplistic way. They're as diverse a cohort as domestic students and some of them can afford to live in more expensive accommodation, others can't. And we need to make sure that we're, you know, catering to that. But one thing, but one thing they do want is to connect with local students more. So that's something I'm quite keen on us addressing and we probably aren't doing enough there.

## **CLIP FIVE**

Duncan: I've heard about it.

Elliot: Yeah, I've been here since -

Duncan: Even got the sticky floor.

Elliot: I actually haven't been in here since first year I don't think.

Duncan: Oh right, oh right.

Elliot: You sure you wouldn't be interested in a Green Monster?

Duncan: \*laughs\* no.

Elliot: It's a mixture of I, I think it's the like, raspberry cider and then the apple cider into this, like green.

Duncan: Fantastic, fantastic.

Elliot: It looks radioactive.

Duncan: I'm sure it tastes radioactive as well.

#### **CLIP SIX**

Elliot: How much are the pints here now?

Barman: So, Amstel's are £2.75.

Elliot: OK.

Duncan: Oooh, that's very reasonable.

Elliot: It's only gone up 5p since -

Duncan: Less than the rent?

Elliot: Yeah, yeah, the rent subsidises the beer.

#### **CLIP SEVEN**

Duncan: Yeah, yeah, OK.

Elliot: This is what domestic students tend to want.

Off camera voice: If you sit down over there.

Duncan: Which one?

Elliot: International students don't really tend to enjoy these sorts of spaces. But yeah, I wanted to chat about some of the protests that have been happening on campus. Obviously so your predecessor, Nancy Rothwell, during her time at university, there was a huge amount of industrial action, protest, rent strikes. During that time, towards the end of her tenure, a number of students were taken through disciplinaries, some were suspended for engaging in protest. And for each of those students, when they got to the end of the disciplinaries, they were only found in breach of health and safety regulations. All they had to do was write a letter saying, you know, that they're not going to do it again. The impact that those suspensions and disciplinaries had on them was huge. It affects their grades, their mental health. You know, if they're working,

then, you know, it's a whole another level of stress. Do you will there still be suspensions and disciplinaries taken against students engaging in protest?

Duncan: So it's really important, I mean, I, I can't predict what's going to happen, but it's really important to distinguish between disciplinary action in relation to protest. We don't discipline people for protesting. Protesting is an absolute sacred right in a liberal democracy, applies to students as well as, you know, other citizens. So there's no discipline. We don't discipline people for protests. The only time there's discipline action is when a student has violated the student code of conduct or violated the code of conduct for the university or a staff member or anyone for that matter who comes onto the campus. So that's the only, that's the focus of any kind of display action, not the protest per se. So it's really important to make that distinction. Now, of course, disciplinary procedures impact the people who go through them in all kinds of ways. Absolutely recognise that, you know, but having said that, as long as it's done in a transparent way, as long as it's done that respects due process, as long as it's done in a way that respects their rights and their ability to understand what's happening and to, to respond to any kind of action that's being taken. You know, I think that's the right way to handle it. I can't say there will be no disciplinaries in future. It all depends on the behaviour and, and the actions involved. Sometimes people do act in ways that aren't acceptable. But you know, I can't say that, you know, whether that will happen in the future or not, we'll just have to see. But it's really important to distinguish between the right to protest. We don't discipline people for that. What where, where it becomes relevant is if behaviour results in some violation or alleged violation of a code of conduct or in danger of somebody's health and safety or all the various other things we have, we have in place. And look, sometimes, unfortunately, that happens.

Elliot: So a couple of weeks ago, the university hosted the World Academic Summit, which was a big conference with loads of universities, a number of academics coming to Manchester. That was protested quite heavily by students in relation to the university's ties to institutions that support Israel. Are you concerned by the use of police force against students on campus during that?

Duncan: Yes. So I'd never like to see police on campus unless it's absolutely necessary. So, yeah, you you never want to see that. And, you know, we did have the police on campus, or at least on Oxford Road at one point, because access to a venue was being blocked. And look, you never want to, you never want to see that. You want that to be the absolute exception. You know, I'm not aware of any incidents that occurred on the back of that. If there were, then people need to go through the appropriate processes. But as a general rule, no, you don't want to see police on campus. I mean, look, because of where we're located, there'll be times where the Greater Manchester Police actually will take control of the situation, right, just because Oxford Road is a public through way etcetera, there are things that we're not actually at liberty to do or the police have a have a view about what should happen. But as a general rule, no, you want to minimise the amount of times you've got police on campus. That's not something that I want to see on a regular basis, for sure.

Elliot: Just a final question on the protests. So, recently the university has started holding these open meetings. We've got one coming up talking specifically about student protest, that sort of thing. In your most recent one, you did an Ask Me Anything in which a lot of the questions were about what's happening in Palestine. Now Lebanon. I noticed during that you used the words Israel, Gaza and the Middle East. At no point did you use the word Palestine –

Duncan: Ah, I didn't, I didn't notice –



Elliot: Or say 'Palestinians'. Are you able to?

Duncan: Yeah absolutely. I mean, you know, Israel, Palestine, Gaza, West Bank, Middle East, I mean, these are all relevant to what's going on and you know, what's happening. You know, I'm not an expert on Middle East politics, but you know, whatever the ultimate resolution of this conflict, whatever it's going to involve, it's going to involve solving the problem of, of a Palestinian state, right? And I'm someone who thinks there needs to be a two state solution. That's a pretty desperately hard thing to imagine right now given what's happening –

Elliot: Given the Israeli government do not want a two state solution?

Duncan: Well, given what, yeah, given what's happening in the region right now,, it's a hard thing to keep hold of, right? But I'm someone who believes that that ultimately has to be part of the solution. I think there needs to be a Palestinian state sitting alongside in peace Israel also the other countries in the region. So that's got to be part of the solution.

### **CLIP EIGHT**

Elliot: So this is Donal from the Manchester Student Renters' Union which is a student society focussed on supporting other students with housing.

Duncan: Good, nice to meet you Donal.

Elliot: Do you have any questions for Duncan?

Donal: Yeah, so, I'm wondering, do you think that The University of Manchester provides affordable accommodation?

Duncan: Um, affordable in the sense of getting the balance right between what we can afford, given what it costs to build accommodation and what we want to offer students as an alternative to what's available in the private market. So I think we're trying to strike a balance between how much it costs to build and provide accommodation right now in Manchester, given, you know, price of land, cost of construction, all that sort of stuff. And given what we know our students are looking for in terms of the variety of accommodation and also the price that they are looking for as well. So it's affordable in that sense. I think trying to get a balance between those things.

Donal: Well, what we say is, an important sense of affordable, the NUS has given us an official definition of saying 40% of the student loan, that students shouldn't spend more than that on rent. You know, at the Student Renters Union, we think that's quite high, generally that students should be paying a lot less than that. But Manchester consistently doesn't really meet that standard.

Duncan: I think very few universities do actually be more specific though I think some of our halls of residence do fall within that range.

Elliot: Two halls.

Duncan: So, I think there's about 1200 beds there. But yeah, I think I think it's very hard given the way, given the cost right now around accommodation to, to meet that on a, on a much larger scale probably. And you know, some students want pretty basic accommodation which can fall within that range, but other students are looking for other kinds of accommodation. So, it's a bit more challenging for that. And the other problem, the other challenge is, of course, the maintenance loan has remained fixed for too long. So, you know, that's an issue which we need

to address. That's relevant to this conversation as well. , I do think the maintenance provision is really inadequate and we should be providing maintenance grants, especially for our most vulnerable students, most disadvantaged students, students coming from the most economically challenging circumstances. So that NUS number is also a function of a fixed maintenance sort of system as well.

Elliot: Just to follow up on that, you've recently said in an interview with The Mancunion that the new accommodation that the university is building with a private company will not be within the NUS affordable criteria.

Duncan: No, it won't be.

Elliot: Are you able to say what the university is expecting those rent prices to be?

Duncan: I mean, look, I'd need to get back to you on the, the, the precise rent, but they're not going to fall within that NUS range. And as I said, that's a function of what can we afford to provide without causing financial distress to the university, balanced against completely reasonable demands from students that accommodation be more affordable than what they can get in the private, in the private sector. And as I said, we then are still able to provide, you know, accommodation that does fall within the NUS range roughly. But, you know, there's not enough of that. And of course, it's quite basic. And some of it's probably, yeah, not great, if we're honest.

Donal: Well, what we say is, is part of the problem with student intake is because Owens Park has been shut down.

Duncan: Owens Park back in the day was one of those that fell within affordability, right?

Donal: Right. And we just think it's really important that if we're replacing it, we have something that meets that standard too, right, Right.

Duncan: So, the challenge we've got is it's almost impossible to build new student accommodation that falls within the NUS range right now. As I said, if, you know, if we were able to increase the maintenance that students received, that would help. But of course the challenge then is, you know, would that be sufficient? But given the way that costs are going, it's not possible for the university to build accommodation that falls within that NUS range. That's just a fundamental challenge that we have. So that you've got two options. One is you do the best you can and you try and get that balance right or you find, you know, funding from elsewhere to subsidise that accommodation. I mean, the one thing we are doing, which I'm sure you're aware of is we do have a working group now with the Students' Union looking at providing more bursaries for accommodation, up to about £2,000 for students to apply there for their accommodation. And actually we're seeing, you know, we are seeing a lot more activity in that space. We're out looking for funding for, for that, and you know that that's a small but important area that we can continue to grow.

Elliot: So given the struggles of, of building new accommodation, how expensive it's become and how likely expensive the rents are going to be for this new development, has it been the right decision for the university not to build the accommodation itself and to use a private company?

Duncan: Yeah, we just can't afford to do it on our own. The cost, given the amount of new investment we need, given the number of new beds we'd like to provide, and given the

improvement in the quality of the accommodation we need, we can't afford to do it on our own. We need to work with a partner in order to deliver it.

Elliot: But by the university saying that it isn't able to afford it, is that then not just passing the buck onto the students because ultimately it is for students that are going to be paying?

Duncan: Look, students are going to absolutely be paying for a portion of the cost of the accommodation. No doubt about it. You know that that goes without saying. But as I said, what we're trying to do is balance the fact that we want to provide more accommodation, and we want to provide higher quality accommodation. And that's something, you know, we need to do as a matter of priority. We can't afford to do it entirely off our own balance sheet. We just don't have those resources. We need to balance that fact with providing accommodation that is as reasonably affordable as it can be, which I accept is not within the in NUS range. That's, you know, that's that that's just the fact we have to sort of grapple with. But then how else, what else can we do? I mean, we don't only provide accommodation, we provide ResLife services, we provide other support service. We provide a whole range of things that students benefit from by living in our accommodation that they don't when living elsewhere on the provide market.

Donal: Yeah but they pay a lot more on top of just rent in the student world. I wouldn't factor those in as bonuses, those are standards that University is expected.

Duncan: Yeah, I didn't call them bonuses. I just said they're part of the provision and that's really important. And that's part of the investment that we need to make, right. It's not, I'm not saying it's something that students should be grateful for. It's something that we need to provide for sure. But the tough thing right now is given the costs of building, how do we balance that against making sure we're providing as affordable accommodation as we can? If for example, we decided to run accommodation in a way that required a very large cross subsidy, well, we'd have to think about, OK, where would that cross subsidy come from? Are there other parts of the university that we would have to in a sense cross subsidised from? And that's a pretty challenging thing to, to, to consider right now given higher education funding in general. So, so, yeah, I mean, look, it's, it's a challenge. I'm not, I'm not saying it's, it's easy. I'm not saying that the the rents are at a level that students are happy with, but we're trying to balance the different factors as best we can.

Donal: Just the last question is, is there any way that you can guarantee about quality of accommodation? You know, because the students talk to us that I've talked to in first year, they complain consistently about basic standards, especially in, in places like Oak House and Whitworth Park. You know, these are places that while affordable to some are almost impossible to live in at points due to, you know, mould conditions, rat infestations. These are these are, you know, basic human rights that are, are not being provided. What's the guarantee with new accommodation that they're going to be able to live up to a standard of comfortable?

Duncan: So, so any accommodation without question should be at the appropriate standard without exception. And students should not be living in rat infested, mould encrusted accommodation. And if they are, we need to, we need to fix it. It's not acceptable. It's not healthy. It's not appropriate. I mean, can I guarantee that it will never happen? I mean, I, I don't have those powers, but I can say that that's not acceptable for any student at The University of Manchester. So we need to fix it. If it does, then when it happens, certainly any of the new accommodation that we're building on this site, for example, absolutely, without question, we need to guarantee that it's of an appropriate, appropriate standard. You know, students, you

know, we have a very diverse student cohort and some students will want very basic accommodation, other students who want all suites, other students who want to live in different arrangements. So that's part of our challenge too. How do we meet that diverse array of, of preferences? But there's a basic standard of quality that we have to provide without, without question. I know it's not met everywhere right now, especially in our older accommodation. And we're just, that's why we need to be start investing now in the new development here. But we need to make sure that we're addressing those issues elsewhere for sure.

Elliot: You think it's too difficult to fix those old accommodations up to a, to a workable standard?

Duncan: I don't. Yeah, look, I don't think so. But having said that, some of our accommodation is probably beyond fixing. And that's why we need to provide, you know, 1000 new beds or whatever we're going to provide through this, around that, through this new development. So some of some of our accommodation is probably beyond repair.

Elliot: Can I ask one final fun question? Would you be willing to spend a week living in Whitworth Park accommodation?

Duncan: Oh, look, I'd be willing to. I would absolutely be willing to spend some time on, on in, in student accommodation for sure. Whether it's a week or not. I'd have to ask my family about that.

Elliot: We were thinking "I'm a Vice-Chancellor, Get Me Out of Here!"

Duncan: Yeah, well, I was saying I did live in accommodation when I went as an undergrad, very similar to Oak House. In fact it's still there too. So I was one of the, I lived in the more basic cinder block type box accommodation. So yeah, happy to consider it.