After Toby Young’s controversial appointment to the Office for Students, comments he made on Radio 4 about “progressive eugenics” were shared far and wide. But his interest in the area has made him some friends.

Last year Young was invited by psychologist James Thompson to attend a secretive conference at UCL, called the London Conference on Human Identification (LCH). “Attendees were only told the venue at the last minute... and asked not to share the information,” Young recalled. What he kept to himself was why the conference he attended was so secretive.

Although a request for the invitation-only conference’s 2017 programme was declined, the 2015 conference included papers arguing that racial differences in penis length predict different levels of parental care, that racial “admixture” has a negative effect on population quality, that “skin brightness” is a factor in global development, and that country-level differences in the number of Nobel Prizes can be explained by racial differences in male hormone levels.

Another paper presented at the 2016 conference argued that “low IQ, high fertility Southern non-Western immigration... threatens the sustainability of European democracy, welfare and civilisation.” Another argued that children from working-class households tend to have “aggressive, antisocial” personalities, and that the welfare state promotes this letting working-class households have children.

Three papers, all by men, were presented on the topic of women being innately less intelligent.

The conference serves as a rendezvous for academic racists and their sympathisers. Speaker, Emil Kirkegaard, whom Young follows on Twitter, presented papers at the 2015, 2016 and 2017 conferences. Writing about pedophilia—his website, he argued in 2012 that “a compromise is having sex with a sleeping child without them knowing it (so, using sleeping medicine). If they, don’t [sic] notice it is difficult to see how they could [sic] be harmed.” He added in April 2017 that he advocated a “frank discussion of pedophilia-related issues.”

Another speaker in 2015 and 2016 was Richard Lynn, described by the US non-profit organisation, Southern Poverty Law Center, as a white nationalist and extremist. He has previously called for “incompetent cultures” to be “phased out” and argues that black people have naturally “psychopathic” personalities.

“No idea is shocking. An idea is only something that you investigate whether it is true or not,” said LCI organiser James Thompson when asked about some of the views at his conference. After telling a female Private Eye reporter at length about gender differences in IQ, Thompson then managed to call the Eye back by mistake — and promptly asked for Toby.

Responding to the Eye, Young said: “I don’t accept that listening to someone express an idea constitutes tacit acceptance or approval of that idea, nor matter how unpalatable. That’s the kind of reasoning that leads to people being ‘no platformed’ on university campuses.” In the same statement he managed to misname his own lecture, referring to the “Amanda Holden Memorial Lecture, rather than Constance Holden.

Young himself kept in touch with Thompson and other attendees over Twitter. Speaking alongside them at another conference in Montreal last July, he reminisced that LCI had been “like a meeting of Charter 77 in Vaclav Havel’s flat in Prague in the 1970s”. Is this the kind of free speech universities minister Jo Johnson hopes to see more of on university campuses?