

Education Secretary addresses Universities UK conference

Thank you Julia.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honour to be here and I'd like to thank Universities UK for their kind invitation to join you.

It's fair to say that I have had a busy first few weeks as Education Secretary.

I can clearly recall that day in July when the Prime Minister asked me to take on this job... going into the Cabinet Room ... the immense excitement I felt on being given the chance to play a role in shaping what we do in education, to change so many lives for the better.

I must confess, I am driven by a mission... a mission to ensure that everyone, from early years to adulthood, whatever their background, is able to extract the absolute maximum out of their time in education. And I know that is a mission that is shared by every single one of you in this room.

Every Education Secretary knows when they take on this role that they become a guardian to one of our national treasures. Now lots of things are described as national treasures, but our higher education system is genuinely one of them.

It is known everywhere around the world as a byword for excellence. Your reputation is second to none...

We have four universities in the QS world's top 10. The most recent figures we have show there are around 60 serving world leaders who have all benefited from a British education. Since 2001 we have produced 20 Nobel prize winners.

These are tremendous statistics and they make me incredibly proud as they do our nation.

So you can rest assured, I will be doing everything I can to both protect and build on that reputation, to see that your sector continues to shine and that we continue to lead the world.

Over the last few weeks I have been listening to your concerns and how we go about maintaining this incredible national resource not just for today's students but for future generations.

Only last week I hosted a roundtable of vice-chancellors to hear first hand how we go about doing that.

I think it's fair to say that there are a variety of opinions in the university sector.

There is one thing I do find almost total agreement on, however, and that's the importance of our openness to the world.

The vice-chancellors I was talking to might have had their differences about some things but they were as one on the importance of the UK being a global leader in higher education and what we need to do it with it.

Now just because we are negotiating our exit from the European Union, that doesn't mean that we are cutting our ties with Europe or indeed the rest of the world. I am quite clear that as far as education is concerned we need to be bolder than ever before.

We must step forward in the world and be clear of the global role of our universities. People have always come here to study and we are very glad and privileged to have them.

A recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that after graduation, a single cohort of international students contributes almost £3.2 billion in tax over 10 years and plays a key role in filling existing skills shortages in the UK economy.

But they bring far more than that. They contribute to the diverse tapestry of our national life; they not only bring the best of the world in, they also help us to look out, and our entire economic and cultural spectrum is the richer for what they bring to our country.

In the months and years ahead, the partnerships we make through these international networks will be crucial. Partnerships which I know benefit many of our young people through the exchange of ideas and learning. Many of you are wondering about what's going to happen to them after we leave the EU.

I want to reassure you that my department is open to continuing to be part of schemes like Erasmus+. But we have to prepare for every eventuality and it is sensible to consider all options.

As such I have asked my officials to provide a truly ambitious scheme if necessary.

In March this year my predecessor Damian Hinds set out the government's ambitions in a new international education strategy and I'd like to acknowledge everything he did to help drive this forward.

I can assure you ladies and gentlemen, I am doubling down.

I want the best minds from around the world to come here to study, research and work in the UK. We plan to increase the number of international students we host by 30% by 2030. We also want to see the value of education exports rising to £35 billion by then. Enabling global Britain to continue its record levels of investment in our vital public services.

As part of that commitment I can announce that we will be introducing a new two-year "Graduate Route", or post-study work arrangement, for graduates to stay in the UK after their degrees.

This will mean that students who want to study in the UK will have time to work, time to develop their skills and time to secure a sponsor if they want to make a more longstanding contribution to our economy.

Bringing us into line with our main international competitors – countries like Canada, Australia and the US.

But I'm not suggesting we stop at matching our competitors; I want us to beat them and I want students from all over the world to pick our universities before any others.

I'd like to thank all of you today who have done so much to protect and promote the UK's reputation as a destination for international students. You have shifted the debate.

When I took on this job, you told me that you wanted the post-study Graduate visas more than anything else. Indeed whenever I spoke to a vice chancellor the first thing I would hear is visas. Well, we listened and the Prime Minister and I have given you what you asked for, what you wanted most.

So I have to ask you for something in return.

I see this as a deal. I expect you, in exchange, to drive greater access to your institutions. Young people from deprived backgrounds who have the ability, deserve to benefit from studying for a degree.

We cannot forget that ability is evenly spread across this country but opportunity – sadly – is not.

We must continue to crusade to put that right.

But this is not about lowering standards. In fact in order to maintain our reputation students need to be reassured that their degree will be worth something, that it will give them the knowledge and the skills they need to achieve whatever goals they set themselves. It has to be seen as a good investment for them.

And I have another challenge for you: I want you to be ambitious in your engagement with the wider education landscape, with schools, colleges, and employers: share your resources and expertise, drive excellence across the sector more widely.

You are world leaders but you need to share your expertise with everyone in the country. I'd like to thank those universities like Kings College and Exeter who have set up maths specialist free schools; and other universities that are in the process of doing so. What you are doing will change lives. I encourage others to rise to the challenge.

I expect others to rise to the challenge.

I see this as a shared effort and I want to work with all of you in the sector to make sure all our children have access to this kind of excellence and expertise.

And we must not forget that over half of young people do not attend university. Already we've made great progress raising standards in post-16 education but we have so much more that we need to do.

I want you to continue to work in even greater partnership with the further education sector and employers. The pioneering Institutes of Technology, that I'll be talking about in more detail in a minute, are an example of what we can achieve when we work together.

For most young people, moving away from home for the first time will be an enormous step into the unknown. It's one of the reasons they choose to go to university in the first place.

I can clearly remember the nervous excitement as I prepared to leave home for the first time. For someone who'd grown up in Scarborough, Bradford seemed a very, very long way away.

Obviously going to Lancashire would have been a step too far...

But it was certainly one of the greatest opportunities I've had in my life. And it's one that so many young people will be sharing over the next few weeks. Their worlds will suddenly have got so much bigger. Some of them may well find the adjustment challenging.

So your responsibilities are twofold: you have to not only stretch and mould young minds but also give people a helping hand as they take their first steps towards adulthood and independence.

It has been amazing to see the great work that you have been doing. Far greater attention is given to students' health and wellbeing than used to be the case and I welcome the support that you give to all these new arrivals through things like the Education Transitions Network, the Step Change Programme and the Mental Health Charter.

It is just another example of how you continue to adapt and develop what you provide for students.

Many of the things I am going to talk about today have been raised by the independent panel to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Philip Augar and the panel for all their hard work on what is a thorough and comprehensive study. It is going to make a big difference to our thinking. I'd also like to thank all the stakeholders, including many of you here today, who contributed to it.

I look forward to working with you to ensure that we have a joined up post-18 education system that is accessible to all, builds the skills we need, promotes choice and competition and provides value for money for students and for taxpayers.

Anyone, from any part of Britain with the talent, or potential must feel welcome and have the chance to be the best version of themselves they can be.

We need to obliterate once and for all the kind of prejudice where some people are held back by others' expectations of what they can achieve.

Nobody with the potential should be dissuaded from going to university because they think it isn't for them. Although we know a greater proportion of 18-year-olds than ever before are going on to higher education, and record rates of those are from a disadvantaged background, the truth is these young people are still under-represented, and when they do enter higher education they are less likely to complete it.

White lads on Free School Meals are far less likely to go to university than other groups, and young black men and women are less likely to succeed when they get there.

This is not good enough. Society should not, and I will not, let this wasted potential go unchecked a minute longer.

I would like to say thank you to all of you who have been working hard to remove the obstacles that exist for some sections of society, young people who have the odds stacked against them from a young age.

Your passion and vision to improve their life chances are an inspiration.

Plenty of universities are introducing schemes to address this, Kings College London for example, has been blazing a trail on supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds for years. This has seen a steady rise in students from ethnic minorities and state schools.

And to those that aren't I'd say: ask yourself what more you need to do – and get on with doing it.

Another scheme I'm hugely excited by is 'Realising Opportunities'. This group of universities including Goldsmiths, Kings, Lancaster and Leeds are boosting access for 16-17 year olds who are deemed the 'most able, least likely'. Between them they've helped more than 7,000 young people who might otherwise not have considered higher education to take the step up.

That's 7,000 kids whose lives took totally different paths because of those universities who have been doing that outreach work and their lives will have been changed for the better because of it.

I welcome the work that the Office for Students has been doing not just on access but also helping to tackle drop-out rates, improve attainment of qualifications and progression from higher education.

I see that 41 universities have just published more ambitious access plans which is good news.

So I know the will is there. What we have to do now, is make sure these initiatives are having the effect we want them to.

The sector plans to spend around £1 billion this year alone on improving access. But we still don't know enough about what's working and what isn't.

This is taxpayers money. This is students' money. This isn't about virtue signalling. This is about one thing, and one thing only. And that is ensuring that talented young people, from Southend to South Shields, can get on.

It is your duty and our duty to make sure that happens. So as a priority, the OfS needs to ensure that evaluation programmes are in place to make sure these schemes are doing what they are supposed to do.

I will be watching carefully to see how these are now delivered and I will support the OfS in any action it takes if universities are not delivering against their commitments.

Once we are sure that they are, ladies and gentlemen, we will be one step closer to making sure children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds get the best from your offer. eradicating the social mobility gap.

And let's be clear about our reasons. This is not just about levelling the playing field; it's not just about social fairness; it's not an exercise in ticking boxes. This is about making sure that every adult in the country can play a full – and fulfilling – part in our future.

We are making tremendous strides in our ambition to make sure that all young people get a world-class education that's right for them.

But there is one area where we cannot afford to ease up. And that area is standards.

The OfS gained its full powers on 1 August and its register of providers is up and running. The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework is bedding down and I have just received Shirley Pearce's review of how things are progressing. I'll be responding to that shortly.

Students, too, are beginning to show greater satisfaction with value for money in the courses they take.

But there is much more to do.

Unconditional offers have shot up, going from under 3,000 in 2013 to nearly 76,000 this year.

Grade inflation has become even more entrenched. When I was at university, you could count the number of students on my course who got firsts on one hand. I am sad to say that I was not one of them. Now it seems that they are ten a penny. In 1997 – which is when I graduated – 50% of students gained a first or a 2:1; last year 80% of students did so.

I'm delighted that some universities have already scrapped making so-called 'conditional unconditional' offers and I hope that the rest will soon follow suit.

Universities UK and OfS reviews of admissions are an opportunity for the sector to get its house in order here, perhaps by agreeing a minimum predicted grade threshold, or a maximum proportion of students who may be

offered one.

I want you to know that I will always speak up for your autonomy. I know its what helps foster the brilliance of our teaching and our research but I also need to safeguard our reputation, so that everyone knows that they can trust the system.

So we need to work together on some of these issues.

If we don't tackle them, your hard-won reputation for excellence will be undermined.

Worse still, there is a risk that employers will begin to lose faith in grades and foreign students will think twice about investing their time and money in studying here.

Your institutions will be the backbone of our country as it establishes its new place in the world. You are helping to create a dynamic economy, enabling our communities to flourish and putting the UK on a firm footing for an exciting future.

Higher education is vital in providing the UK with enough workers with the right skills and qualifications for the jobs we need – the architects and the doctors and the software designers – it will also drive the economy in terms of innovation and research.

It's a huge inspiration to me personally, to see how far ahead of the curve you are, constantly pushing the boundaries of human knowledge and taking us further with every step.

To further oil the wheels we will be taking a number of active steps to open up markets and work opportunities.

A key aspect to this will be to boost further education and its links with industry and business. We have a live consultation on proposals to improve and grow higher technical education. This closes at the end of the month so I urge you to make your views known. Chances to change the face of education don't come round every day. Please do make the most of this opportunity. You have a vital contribution and we want to hear it.

So I am excited that the first 12 Institutes of Technology will start opening over the coming months. These are a new type of high-quality employer-led organisation, backed by £170million of government funding. They show partnership working at its best and each Institute is a joint effort involving universities, FE colleges and employers. So many in this room are already doing this.

This collaborative approach will deliver teaching of the highest standard, from providers with proven track records and that directly responds to the needs of local employers.

Our reformed apprenticeships are also going from strength to strength. They are now becoming embedded in business and young people are warming to the

fact that they can learn AND earn at the same time. In fact more than 208 thousand of them did so last year alone.

There is a real momentum building in higher education at the moment and I want us to make the most of it but I need your help here.

Take the lead in your local communities, work with businesses, engage civic leaders. Between you, you can take us to the next level in developing the skills, the research and the innovation that is going drive this country forward.

It will be this kind of collaboration that will help us make that leap; will help turn research into enterprise and theory into application.

Before I finish I want to assure you that it is an enormous privilege to be your champion in government. It is a role I have been extremely proud and excited to take on and I am looking forward to working with you very much.

When I set out for Bradford all those years ago, I had no idea that it would eventually lead me here. And this is what is so fantastic about our higher education system. It can set all of us on a path that we can't begin to imagine when we start out, and the opportunities it offers along the way are truly remarkable.

Those of us who have benefited from it owe you more than I can say. So to all the lecturers and leaders, past and present, thank you. While I am the Education Secretary, you will not find someone else who will fight tooth and nail for you. I hope that in the few weeks I have been in this role I have demonstrated this. But let's work together to change the lives of the future generation. Now let's all go and make a difference to the lives of many more young people.