

Universities Minister gives speech at Universities UK conference

It's great to be with you here today.

I'd been looking forward to this date for some time – I think I put it back in my diary last December. Obviously a few things have changed since then.

I've had an invaluable experience over the past few weeks as Health Minister and, if anything, it's only reinforced my appreciation for this sector, as I've got out and about in our hospitals and seen first-hand the unbreakable link between health and higher education – be it in the workforce or new medicines and treatments.

Above all, I've recognised the same, undeniable social value generated by both our higher education sector and our health sector – pushing the frontiers of knowledge to improve our lives and wellbeing, and training people up for high-quality, high-value careers in their local communities. But this has always been my dream job – and I'm delighted to be back.

When you've lost something you love doing, you come to reflect upon what you wanted to say, if you got one more chance to do so.

Now that I've got that chance, I thought I would share with you some of my personal reflections on what I believe should be the future of Higher Education.

Those of you who've met me already – and I can see quite a few familiar faces in the room- know that I passionately believe in the opportunities that Higher Education and attending university brings. That universities transform the lives of individuals, and the communities that they serve. I knew that long before I became Universities Minister the first time, having taught at Bristol University before I became a politician, seeing for myself first-hand the awesome power that the transfer of knowledge brings, watching my students grow in confidence, expanding their horizons and understanding, finding their place in the world. It's one of the greatest privileges academic teaching can bring.

It's a feeling that I'm sure unites us all in this room – you certainly know it if you've felt it. So I start unashamedly with a principle that I will defend, and defend again: there are not too many people going to university.

The 2019 version of the OECD's Education at a Glance report launched earlier this week by the Higher Education Policy Institute confirmed just that. As Andreas Schleicher himself said, the UK economy is in fact very responsive to the skills and qualifications our citizens have, and this country will continue to see growing demand for workers with graduate level skills.

We live in a modern, knowledge economy, one which requires the advanced skills that university teaches. Other countries fully recognise this. To take

a different path risks eroding the progress that we have made as a nation, a nation that has travelled so far in recent decades in placing education at the forefront of its investment. Over the past year- and I can't quite believe it hasn't yet been a year since I was first appointed Universities Minister- I've visited 39 universities across the country. In fact, I think I have the highest university visit run-rate of any minister since David Willetts! And today, I'll be visiting my 40th, Birmingham City University – an institution with the Arts and Humanities firmly at its core in the form of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Since becoming Universities Minister the first time round, I've been keen to defend the Arts and Humanities, and shall continue in my efforts to ensure their value is enhanced and appreciated as we make our way into a new, uncertain world; a world where languages, communication and inter-cultural awareness are going to be more important than ever before.

Each and every one of my university visits has only reinforced my belief in Higher Education and the value that HE expansion has contributed to society.

From the Student Unions that are modern, professional organisations committed to voluntary work and advancing the causes of student mental health, to the early career researchers passionate about their work and demonstrating to me its value, to the wider investments that universities are making in the other parts of my ministerial brief, whether that is in space technology at Leicester, nuclear robotics at Manchester, or Quantum technology at Sussex.

Universities are crucial to our society; as institutions, they are woven deep both into the fabric of local communities but also our national reputation.

The work of the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission earlier this year has helped to tease this out and I am pleased that so many of you have committed to create Civic University Agreements going forwards, to cement your contribution to your cities and regions.

I am also pleased to learn of work like the '21st Century Lab' being led by the University of Lincoln, which is opening up thinking on how our higher education sector should develop as our economics, societies, nations and cultures evolve.

And it is in the context of this changing world that it is worth reflecting upon your importance.

I'm proud to be the Minister for a sector which boasts many of the best universities in the world – including four in the QS World top 10, and 18 in the top 100. A sector which is second in the world in attracting global talent to study here.

As the Minister who published the International Education Strategy, as well as the International Research and Innovation Strategy earlier this year, I know we all can, and want, to go even further.

Which is why I am delighted that the Prime Minister and the Education and Home Secretaries announced the return of the two year post-study work visa

this week. And I want to pay tribute here to the work of my predecessor Jo Johnson for his efforts to make this a reality.

I want to work with everyone in this room to ensure the United Kingdom continues to be an attractive place to study.

As your Minister, I want you to know that I will continue to also take the approach that I have always done with the sector: to listen, to learn, and to work together to help co-create the solutions to the challenges that we face.

And of course, I recognise that the sector does indeed face challenges.

But I've always taken the approach that if we work hand in hand, as critical partners and friends, we possess the will and the ability to meet them.

And we have in this government and the Prime Minister someone who is willing to create the environment to enable our universities to succeed for the future.

I've only been gone from this role less than fifty days, but already we have had key announcements on expanding the government guarantee to fund European Research Council grants, and a crucial restatement of our ambition to raise R&D spending to 2.4% of GDP by 2027.

This restatement matters, and it will shape our future as a nation. With the support and advice of UKRI and many others, we are working hard on the roadmap for achieving this target. After outlining my vision in a series of speeches before the summer, I am keenly looking forward to getting this detailed roadmap published this autumn. Let me just offer one early reflection, though. If we want to turn the UK into scientific superpower and achieve our ambition to reach 2.4%, then we need to ramp up capacity and capability in our universities. And as you know, one of my final acts as science minister last time around was to announce a significant real-terms increase to QR funding – the largest increase in a decade.

Connected to this, I am determined to see renewed focus given to basic research. Funding for blue-skies, curiosity-driven research has been dwindling as a proportion of our overall spend. This is a problem. As part of our 2.4% package I want to see further increases to QR and a significant uplift to response-mode research council funding.

Don't get me wrong. It is of course essential that we should continue to drive application and impact from our research investments – turning great ideas into real benefits for the UK in the form of better jobs, improved products and services, and real action on issues such as climate change.

Let me reassure you that I remain firmly committed to the impact agenda and to knowledge exchange, including support via HEIF and implementation of the Knowledge Exchange Framework.

But if we want to succeed in the long term, the really long term, then we need to ensure we are doing everything we can to entice and empower our research community to undertake the most ground-breaking, cutting edge work,

raising the UK's international reputation even higher.

That's why as Science, Research and Innovation Minister, I will continue to make the case, time and time again, for not just the importance of raising public funding for research, but as the Minister who published the International Research and Innovation Strategy, and commissioned Sir Adrian Smith to undertake a review of how we can improve and increase our international science and research partnerships, that we seek to transform our research agenda, to become the partner country of choice, and to invest in new models of research funding that will catalyse this.

And as we approach leaving the European Union, I will continue to make the case loud and clear, that while we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving our European friends and research partners behind. We want to get a deal with the EU which will protect our continuation in Horizon 2020, and will continue our participation in Erasmus+. We will be fully exploring the option of participating in the next Erasmus programme, whilst also developing potential alternatives which are ambitious and truly global. We will protect our participation in Erasmus+ and will be working hard to secure full association with Horizon Europe – I personally will be doing everything in my power to achieve this.

In order to manage the transition through Brexit, I want to reassure the sector that EU nationals who start a higher education course in England in the 2020/21 academic year or before will continue to be eligible for 'home fee' status and student finance support on a similar basis to domestic students for the full duration of their course. And as we scale up our research efforts, we must make sure that every single one of our brilliant scientists and researchers is able to work in a vibrant and diverse research environment – underpinned by an institutional culture of trust, support and integrity.

I therefore want to give my strong backing to the work that Julia Buckingham has led to review and update the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. I encourage everyone in this room to now do their part to bring it to life.

I also want us to learn lessons from what works in other sectors, such as the NHS, that are successfully tackling bullying and harassment.

One of the lessons I will take away from my 'placement', as it were, within the NHS, relates to my work on the NHS People Plan. For if we are to ensure organisations and institutions are to be sustainable for the future, then we need to invest in people, at every stage of their lives. Creating not only new jobs, and indeed recognising that these jobs may need to adapt for the future, but building careers.

As institutions that are leading the world in creating ideas, talent and social value, universities should aspire to be beacons of virtue and lead by example. We need to be looking closely not only at how we train, but also how we retain the academics of the future; so a focus on the working conditions of early career research, building a pipeline of talent, is absolutely vital.

But a well-functioning university culture needs sustainable institutions. And when it comes to ensuring that we have a sustainable university landscape, while it is absolutely right that we focus on post-18 education for all, making investment in Further Education that is desperately needed, we must not lose sight of what we have in the HE sector.

We cannot afford as a society to pit FE against HE: as I have argued elsewhere, both are crucial to a unity of purpose in our post-18 landscape that needs to be more flexible, more portable, and one that meets the needs of the learner, not simply those of the provider.

And at the same time, ensuring that access and participation remains at the heart of that vision also. How we achieve this must be central to not just my mission as Universities Minister, but all of our missions. Universities have made vast improvements since 2010, but there is, I believe, much more we can do together. Access and Participation plans are just the start. Those of you who have read my previous speeches will know that I believe that we can go further focusing not just on the importance of increasing access, but realising that the journey does not end once students pass through the university door. Understanding that student transition, experience and progress, through to a successful degree outcome are all equally important and we can and must do more to deliver for disadvantaged students throughout their university career.

In my last speech as Universities Minister in July, I touched upon where I believe the sector and government will need to focus its attention for the future. Effective data will be vital if we are to understand how to drive performance, and I remain determined to ensure that universities have the effective tools to analyse and drive their civic missions to improve access for WP categories.

Universities have never been better placed to help be the agents of change, unlocking the opportunities that can transform disadvantaged communities in their regions. I know from my experience that you too are all passionate about making further progress. What progress will look like for the future is a debate which I wish to engage the sector on. Already we have the review of admissions by the OfS and UUK, and I believe that we can continue to focus on the best practice that should exist on that critical, defining, relationship between secondary and tertiary education. But I also believe that when it comes to admissions, in turn we will need to continue to be more radical still, as I spoke in my Birkbeck lecture in July, recognising that contextual offers will take on an increasing importance if we are to deliver a truly level playing field that provides opportunity from some of the most disadvantaged in society.

The truth is, you know as well as I do, that our universities are remarkable institutions of knowledge; complex and intricate organisations, the product of decades of dedication from individuals who have built them to become the success story they are today. Reform and change too, while vital if we are to meet the future challenges of the twenty first century, must recognise this, alongside ensuring the principle of autonomy, enshrined in law, is recognised and respected.

It is my role as your minister, to both be challenged by yourselves, but also to challenge, to act as a critical friend, but also as your champion and ambassador, both at home and abroad.

I look forward to working with you all to secure a bright, truly international future for our universities in the years to come.

Thank you.