

Destination UK: Supporting international learners through coronavirus

Good afternoon everyone.

I am so pleased to be talking to you today and I would like to start off by thanking the British Council for enabling this to happen.

It is really rather slightly ironic that we are having to take such pains to stay away from one another, when the British Council came into being to show people the importance of those relationships and coming together.

As you know it was launched at a time when the world was also in the grip of a terrible crisis. Back in 1934 as countries pulled away from one another in mistrust and self-interest, the British Council was brave enough to see that by reaching out, we would help one another to move forward and develop.

This is something we all need to keep in mind now more than ever and it is at the core of what I would like to talk to you about today.

We all feel distanced in so many ways right now but as a nation we want our doors to remain open, and that remains the case for the hundreds of thousands of young people who are part of Destination UK and who choose to study here.

We have built a reputation as a tolerant and inviting place, whether you're studying, travelling or doing business.

Just like the British Council, our universities embody the spirit of cultural friendship and the global exchange of ideas that goes back through the centuries.

The reason that international students flock to destination UK is not just because the education that they receive is second to none, but also that they know they will be welcome here. And that they will find a home away from home here, plus they will enrich their lives here.

And in return UK national students find they look at the world with fresh eyes. Our international campuses are culturally richer and more varied, our communities grow, our businesses flourish. And all through the expertise and contribution of these young minds.

In short, the international student community is vital to Britain's national interest not just economically but because they are so very much a part of the fabric of this nation.

So turning to recent times, we are all too aware that the coronavirus pandemic has caused hardship and grief all over the world. We have seen suffering to individuals, businesses and communities alike. And the world's

Higher Education sector has not been immune.

But I want to stress how very proud I am of the response by the UK's HE sector to both help with the fight back against Covid 19 and also to ensure that students are supported whilst having access to flexible and high quality online learning.

As we begin to win the battle against Covid-19 and fully open up our education institutions once again, I would like our international student community to know that we are still the same welcoming and first class academic destination we have always been.

So how can we reassure the student community and of course their families, that the UK still offers them a safe and nurturing place to study?

I think the best way to reassure them is with the facts – and the fact is that throughout the Covid-19 outbreak, the UK has continued to support international students.

Let me clear those who planned to come here in the autumn can still do so.

In fact this week, we issued guidance to help universities decide how to reopen their campuses and buildings in ways that also protect the health & wellbeing of both students & staff.

It is no surprise that UK Universities have risen to the recent challenges. They have always been hubs of invention and innovation.

I have been proud to hear of institutions going above and beyond to support their students but to be honest we expected nothing less from our UK institutions.

The list of examples is too long to highlight them all here, but to mention just one, Queen's University Belfast, for instance, has been reaching out to all international students both on and off campus to offer guidance and support at this time.

Students could leave their accommodation contracts and not lose out financially. In addition, the university has couriered belongings home at no charge.

Our universities have all been developing ways to create stimulating and engaging ways online content. And as we enter a new academic year, institutions will in the main be developing combined approaches to prioritise safety meaning courses may be delivered partly using innovative online provision and partly through traditional face-to-face means. This will be done while maintaining the educational benchmarks that are known and envied throughout the world.

In addition, the Government is working very hard to ensure that international students do not have to jump through hoops to come here and that immigration regulations are as flexible as they can be.

And today I can assure you we'll keep this under review for as long as we need to. I want to use this opportunity to highlight and remind everyone that last year we announced a new Graduate Route to enable international students who had been awarded their degree to stay and work here for up to two years, this will be introduced in Summer 2021.

I want to be utterly clear – this means students who start UK courses from this autumn onwards will be able to benefit from this, and we look forward to them doing so.

But I want to underline our commitment to our international students further. So today, I can announce today that I have appointed an International Education Champion and am delighted to tell you that Sir Steve Smith has accepted the role.

As many of you will already know, Sir Steve has huge experience in the higher education sector, holding a number of prominent positions, most notably as the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of the University of Exeter.

I have no doubt that his energy and passion for the role will mirror that of the UK's towards international students.

Before I finish, I really would like to mention one aspect of coming to study in this country that I think is absolutely vital.

We are all sadly too aware that people around the world have suffered and many have lost friends or loved ones. This will put young people under even greater pressure and emotional stress.

But let me be clear student wellbeing is at the heart of the UK higher education experience and all our universities and other providers are now focused on their pastoral role now more than ever. So whether that's in finding students accommodation, or helping them manage the step up from school, or providing mental health support and also in coping with the aftermath of Covid-19.

My guarantee today to any young person who is thinking about coming to the UK to study (plus those who love them) is that you will be shown exactly the same kind of care and consideration as any other British national students will!

Parents and carers here would expect no less for their children and neither should those from anywhere else.

I would like to finish by sharing an observation by the American author Henry Miller who said:

“One's destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things”.

Destination UK is an ambition for many international students but it is only when they arrive here that they will recognise:

- the incredible support network we offer
- the innovative and exciting approach taken to the next step of their academic journey and fundamentally the springboard to their future career
- And that there is no substitute for some of the world's best courses as well as a world class student support system and not even Covid-19 can stop that.