Speech: Education Secretary sets vision for boosting social mobility

Thank you very much to the Resolution Foundation for chairing and to David for that introduction.

And good morning everyone. It's a great pleasure to see so many people here this morning.

In particular, I'd like to take the chance to welcome the new chair of the Social Mobility Commission, Dame Martina Milburn. I'm very much looking forward to working with you and your team, and, indeed, to being challenged by you on these issues.

For Dame Martina, and for some many people here, of course, have championed social mobility for a long time.

It is also a cause very close to my heart.

Social mobility is, ultimately, why I'm in politics – it's why I wanted to come to be a minister at the Department for Education. In fact, I think it is a large part why we have a Department for Education – a core purpose of that department.

Everyone should have the chance to fulfil that spark of potential which exists in all of us.

You shouldn't be destined to travel a certain path just because of the place that you start. That's a simple concept – but not so easy to get right as many have found over the years.

And yet it is a moral imperative. It's fundamental to our ideas of fairness and social justice because progress for our society should be progress for all, but especially for the most disadvantaged, the ones who start with the odds most stacked against them.

Now, social mobility is also fundamental for a strong, highly skilled, productive economy, which successfully deploys and maximises its human resources – which, of course, can sound quite dry and inhuman.

But it's productivity growth that underpins economic growth, and in turn it's that which allows people to be paid a little more each year, and for us to be able afford the public services on which we all depend.

So, the case for social mobility, I think, is self-evident.

But how mobile are we as a society?

Well, historically, Britain has been compared a little unfavourably to other countries, but we can now point to a lot of progress looking back on our

history. And there are building blocks in place now for greater social mobility in the future.

Thanks to the hard work of our teachers and to our reforms –1.9 million more children are now being taught in Good or Outstanding schools than there were eight years ago. That's 88% of children, up from 66% in 2010.

The Pupil Premium has made sure there is more support for those children who come from a less affluent background. And, importantly, we're making sure that those interventions can be based on good evidence – through the independent Education Endowment Foundation.

Whereas once we measured a school's performance by its A-C pupils in five subjects – now, through progress 8, everyone's progress counts towards the key measure. This stops a disproportionate focus on the C/D borderline, to the detriment of others at both ends of the scale.

The number of 19 year olds without GCSEs in maths and English is now at a record low.

And, critically, since 2010 the gap in early years development has fallen by 14%.

Since 2011, the attainment gap has narrowed by 10% amongst 11 year olds at key stage 2 and the same is true at GCSE level.

And we have more disadvantaged pupils going on to university than ever before.

I'm also delighted to see here with us today some of the incredibly committed Opportunity Area chairs here today. They are doing fantastic work breaking the cycle of wasted talent in some of the most challenging areas of the country. This is a key programme started by my predecessor Justine Greening. And I pay tribute to her ongoing work on social mobility.

But the progress made shouldn't blind us to the challenge.

10% is a good start in terms of reducing the gap, but there is more to go.

We shouldn't forget that these are gaps that open up very early on.

Right now 28% of children finish their reception year without the early communication and reading skills that they need to thrive. I'll be coming back to this statistic later on.

But what do these gaps like these mean? And why do they matter? Ultimately, your education stays with you.

We know there are opportunities out there for people, whatever your background – great schools, world-class universities and a thriving job market, so there are options.

But how meaningful are these options? And how meaningful are some people's

choices? While some are primed, throughout their lives, to recognise and seize the opportunities that come their way – that isn't true for everyone.

Today I am publishing new analysis by my department which, for the very first time, looks at how children on Free School Meals and children with Special Educational Needs, go on to fare in the job market.

And the results are striking. Children eligible for Free School Meals when they are at school are 23% less likely to be in sustained employment at the age of 27, compared to their peers.

And in fact, it's a similar result for children identified with special educational needs – 25% less likely to be in sustained employment at 27.

Stark facts like these call for an ambitious policy response.

That's why, as David mentioned in his introduction, in 2012, with Eric Ollerenshaw – who I'm pleased to see here today – I helped form and became the first chair of an All-Party Parliamentary Group on social mobility.

And the idea was to work out what we could actually agree on, across the parties, despite our different politics – about the issues that needed to be addressed and constraints, rather than the policy solutions.

And at the beginning we realised that different people can be in the same conversation about social mobility and think everyone else is talking about the same thing – but actually they aren't.

There are, at least, three different things that different people mean by social mobility on different occasions.

In one conversation it's about how helping people from the most difficult, troubled backgrounds, to break out of their very constraining circumstances.

In another conversation it's about how we nurture outstanding talent – allowing the stars to shine.

Other times, we can be talking about helping everyone to fulfil their potential and move on up to be able to get a better education or better job than their parents.

They are all important, and indeed at some point in some way are related, but they typically call for different kinds of policy approaches.

And there are many, many factors that may conspire to hold people back that one can think about.

And in that APPG group, we tried to consider all the drivers and then to simplify, to get to the heart of what makes social mobility work.

So we came up with seven key principles, what we called the Seven Key Truths about social mobility.

These were:

First, that the point of greatest leverage for social mobility is the very earliest time in life. What happens between the ages of zero and three. Primarily that means what happens at home.

Second, you can, of course, also break the cycle through the education you receive at school.

And, third, within that, within education, the most important controllable factor is the quality of teachers and teaching.

Fourth, your school days aren't only about the days you spend at school; it's also about what happens after the school bell rings.

Fifth, as David said, university remains the top swing factor determinant of later opportunities.

But, sixth, it's also possible to create second chances for people later on, with the right will, help and support.

And, finally, seventh, someone's personal resilience and emotional wellbeing can be as important as their exam results – and, of course, frequently linked.

Now, that was 2012 and though you can always argue other things are important too and the list is incomplete, nothing I've heard in those intervening six years since has made me think these seven truths are untrue – and they very much guide my thinking now as Education Secretary.

And today I want to revisit some of these truths.

Focusing today, particularly on the early years, and then looking ahead to the choices and opportunities young people have when they leave school, and how we support them to make the most of those opportunities.

So starting at the beginning with the early years: in that research report we found out that, in those first few years, that you can have the biggest impact in changing someone's future path.

That is why this government has prioritised extending high quality pre-school education and childcare.

For the first time, we introduced 15 hours of free early education a week for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, including looked after children, children with special needs and children of low income families.

That is on top of the 15 hours free childcare offer for all three-and-four-year-olds, which we doubled to 30 hours for working parents.

And we are now seeing more children start school ready and able to learn.

But despite encouraging progress – entrenched challenges remain.

Most pressingly, it is a persistent scandal that we have children starting school and struggling to communicate, to speak in full sentences.

That we have children who have hardly yet opened a book, or had the chance to discover all the worlds books introduce you to.

And this matters.

Because when you're behind from the start you rarely catch up, because, of course, your peers don't wait, the gap just widens and this has a huge impact on social mobility.

On average, disadvantaged children are four months behind at age five. That grows by an additional six months by the age of 11, and a further nine months by the age of 16.

So, by the time they take their GCSEs they are, on average, 19 months behind their peers.

Then what? Well as I've said, your education stays with you.

Children with poor vocabulary at age five are more than twice as likely to be unemployed when they are aged 34.

It's command of language, being able to express ourselves effectively, that is the gateway to success in school – and later on into later life.

That is why I am setting out an ambition today.

As I said earlier, more than a quarter – 28% – of children finish their reception year still without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive. It's not acceptable and tackling it must be our shared priority. My ambition is to cut that number in half over the next ten years.

Now of course, achieving an ambition of this scale will not be easy.

We must continue to prioritise making sure there is high quality pre-school education available where those from disadvantaged backgrounds can access it.

We have previously committed £50 million to expand school-based nursery provision.

As part of this, today I'm announcing we will launch a capital bidding round of £30 million to invite leading schools to come forward with projects to create new high-quality nursery places, demonstrating innovative approaches to closing the gap for disadvantaged children.

And to ensure provision is high quality we must make sure we invest in people as well as in buildings. That is why we will be investing £20 million to train and develop early years professionals, focusing in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country. So they have the expertise to support very young children's early language and literacy skills.

All of this will, I believe, play its part as the first steps towards meeting our long-term ambition. But there is another place to think about as well.

However many more hours of nursery you provide and however much younger and younger you go, the truth is that the majority of these children's time is spent at home.

The home learning environment can be, understandably, the last taboo in education policy – but we simply can't afford to ignore it when it comes to social mobility.

Now there is some good news, which should encourage us. Research from the Social Mobility Commission has found that over the past 40 years, the overall amount of time parents spend on development activities, such as playing and reading with their children has risen significantly. But at the same time it's diverged, the gap in this time investment between parents from more and less advantaged families has actually widened.

Official statistics show that four in five high income parents now read at least once a day to their pre-school child. This compares to just over half on average of low income parents.

I'm a parent myself – I know you're not born knowing how to bring up a child, some of it is instinctive – but most of it isn't. You kind of pick it up from your own parents, from your family and friends, things you read here and there. But you're conscious of what you don't know.

Particularly if you're time poor, struggling to make ends meet – if you have your own literacy struggles.

And so I don't have any interest in lecturing to parents. I know it's parents who bring up their children, who love them, who invest in them in so many ways, who want the best for them.

But that doesn't mean extra support and advice can't be helpful.

And I've seen for myself that giving parents a helping hand can have fantastic results. I recently visited Rothesay nursery in Luton and witnessed a session – a very moving session – with parents and children to encourage reading and language development at home.

There were children at that session who came there unable to talk – now they can't stop.

And the mothers I met were incredibly proud of how their child had transformed and no longer quite so anxious about how they would get on at school.

So parents can welcome advice and help – and this is a shared enterprise.

I know that to achieve the scale of ambition that I've set out, it needs to be a society-wide ambition with businesses, the media, the voluntary sector, and our tech industry all playing their part.

All working together to raise awareness and support parents' confidence around what they can do to help their child's early language development, exposing them to more words, more stories and more books.

Successful public health initiatives like the 5-a-day campaign have become part of the national consciousness. I want to find similar simple solutions for busy parents to help their children's language and literacy.

To kick start this, today I am inviting businesses, broadcasters and a broad range of other organisations to be part of this coalition and to attend a summit this autumn to explore innovative ways to boost early language development and reading in the home.

I'm very pleased that the National Literacy Trust who are already doing fantastic work in this area, will be joining us – as well as Public Health England.

And that leading businesses including WHSmith, British Land and KPMG have signed up.

I'm pleased that the BBC who also do a lot of great work in this space, including improving the communication and language skills of kids starting school behind, will also join the summit. And I'm delighted that we will have ITV there as well.

I want us all to rally around this – to make children's literacy and narrowing the early years gap a national cause, a national mission.

We are already working with the Education Endowment Foundation, to identify the best home learning programmes, offering practical advice to parents who want to do more reading with their children – we'll then look to share the best ideas more widely.

Now, we know that all of us live in two worlds now – the real one and the virtual one. It's easy for kids and parents to spend a lot of our time looking at the screen whether it's our phones, our TVs, our laptops.

And we can derive huge benefits from this, life is much faster, more convenient, more entertaining, but as we all know there are also downsides if we downgrade the benefits of the real world, of human interaction.

But are we also missing a trick here? If our phones and apps can help us bank, shop, diet, exercise and figure out where we are.

Why not also help us with helping our children develop their communication and reading?

There are applications out there with helpful tips and imaginative ideas for helping with children's early development, but not all of these are widely known, and parents won't know which are the best.

That is why the department will be launching a competition to identify high quality apps, with the aim of making these free and easily accessible, making

sure that disadvantaged families don't miss out.

And this isn't just about the early years either – a good home learning environment matters throughout a child's education.

I want to make a leap now, from the earliest years to young people right on the cusp of adulthood.

Across the country, young people are 16 days away from finding out their A-level results – many will be feeling nervous about their results and where their results will take them.

As we established in the Seven Key Truths – university is a key determinant of future success.

Now, on the social mobility front, we can point to record numbers of 18 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds going on to attend university.

But, we should be honest about digging into these figures a little deeper and acknowledging the 18 year old applicants from the most advantaged areas in the country are still nearly five and a half times more likely to enter the most selective universities than their disadvantaged peers. And that, ladies and gentleman, is not acceptable.

And we need to consider whether in all cases a traditional degree at university is the right option for young people, including those from more affluent backgrounds. For a long time, one of the reasons university was such a key determinant of future success was that many of the alternative options towards highly-skilled work were frankly not up to scratch.

Technical education in this country – a country, by the way, with a distinguished history of technical brilliance – has long been seen by many as the second-best option to academic study and university.

This government is committed to making technical education a first-class option through our £500 million investment in T Levels qualifications that will be on a par with A-levels as well as high-quality apprenticeships, including degree-level apprenticeships.

Crucially, employers are helping to set the required standards for T Levels and apprenticeships guaranteeing they will have real currency in the labour market.

Our goal is that in future, all young people, whatever their background, will have much better choices when they start thinking about their post 16 and their post 18 destinations.

So while we improve the choices young people have, we also make sure that they are real choices. We need to make sure that young people from all backgrounds also have a path into the most sought-after universities. That attending the best universities is all about your ability and capacity to benefit – not where you're born or to whom.

And that’s why we are challenging universities on widening access.

Indeed, next year universities expect to spend £860 million to improve access and success for disadvantaged students this is a lot of money and it needs to be spent well.

And to do this we have to think clearly about the challenges we face.

For example, the latest statistics on destinations of sixth form and college students have shown that disadvantaged white pupils are less likely to be studying in higher education the next year than disadvantaged pupils of any other ethnic groups.

And, even though disadvantaged black pupils are almost twice as likely to go to a top third university as white disadvantaged pupils, they are both similarly underrepresented at the most selective universities, including the Russell Group.

We know too that there is great variation across regions of England, with one in five disadvantaged pupils from London, from this city, going to a top third university compared to only one in 17 from the North East.

So I want to harness the great research skills for which our universities are rightly famous, to find out why more students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not getting into those universities and in some cases not even aspiring to attend university, particularly the top ones.

To build our evidence base on what kind of outreach most works, we have asked the Office of Students to launch a new initiative to identify and share the best approaches for getting children from different backgrounds into university, including the most selective.

The tender for this goes out today and we are inviting organisations, and groups of organisations – including, of course, universities themselves – to submit bids.

We’re clear about expecting more from universities on this. But, of course, there is a larger question: why aren’t more state school pupils getting top results in A-levels, in the subjects we know universities and employers value?

Right now, we know only 7% of children go to private school and yet in 2016-17 just under 23% of young people going to Russell Group universities were from private schools and 40% of young people going to Oxbridge were.

But, then, private schools are responsible for 14% of all students taking A-levels. And they represent 25% of students getting three or more As at A-level.

So universities certainly need to do more to close the gap but we also need to do more at school-level.

Now, we are making progress.

The percentage of Free School Meal pupils who are achieving the equivalent to an old grade C or above in English and maths has risen from 35.1% in 2010/11 to 40.3% in 2016/17.

But, clearly, there is further to go and that's why we are investing in schools in the most deprived areas, targeting support towards children struggling with core skills like maths, reading and writing, investing in teachers' professional development as well, again, especially in the places where this can make the biggest difference.

But it's not just the attainment gap. There can also be an expectation gap and a knowledge gap when it comes to making the best choices as a student and a parent.

For middle-class parents, there's an awareness that there are harder and easier subjects and, as parents, we might encourage our children to do some of the harder ones – whether that's maths or history or, these days, Mandarin, because we know they can also be a signalling device to universities and to employers.

Now this is partly why we introduced the idea of the English Baccalaureate, the EBacc, which covers the core academic subjects like maths, English, science, humanities and languages.

We know that lower participation in core academic subjects can negatively affect social mobility.

The Ebacc signals to all families, all students, that these are generally the subjects that will keep your options most open and whatever your future career path: make sure you get your core academic grounding.

And while it's vital that children have the opportunity to build on this core, we need to make sure that this is also through rigorous, stretching qualifications which are appropriate to the needs of all pupils.

And that's why my department is undertaking a thorough review of all the non-GCSE qualifications currently taken by 14 to 16-year-olds to make sure the only options available are high-quality ones that employers can recognise and trust.

Social mobility is, of course, a complex issue to crack.

I've focused in particular today on two of what we call the seven key truths – but this is only part of the story. Social mobility will be a huge focus for my department – as I said I believe this is a big part of why we have a Department for Education.

One crucial area in particular I will be saying more on is character and resilience – how this is shaped by your relationships and experiences, the aspirations of those around you, and by taking part in extra-curricular activities from sport, to music, to volunteering, to work experience itself.

You won't crack social mobility by only focusing on exam results – and this

is an area where I believe we need to do more, and indeed understand more.

So I'm delighted that Dame Martina and the Social Mobility Commission will be undertaking a major piece of research work on how extracurricular activities, networks and the development of so-called soft skills can influence social mobility, looking at the gaps between disadvantaged young people and their peers – and how these vary by factors such as region, ethnicity, gender, special educational needs, as well as some of the solutions for tackling this.

I look forward to using the results of this research to take further steps on behalf of those children who aren't getting the rich range of cultural experiences they need.

I'm also clear that this is a challenge for the long haul – and not one not just for the Minister or, indeed, government of the day.

And that's why I'm commissioning a new big data project that will follow in the footsteps of the American economist Raj Chetty's landmark work mapping out social mobility in the United States which showed how your chances of beating the odds and improving your lot was hugely affected by where you happened to live.

Our project will look at young people today, from across the country, and where they end up over the next five or six years. And I hope by then we will have gathered a huge wealth of information that will benefit researchers and policy makers for decades to come.

That is for the future – we must also keep up the urgency today.

Our economy is changing fast and while the rapid technological change we're seeing presents so many opportunities for Britain we can also expect labour market upheaval. We need a plan for people and places that could otherwise be left behind.

We need a country that is fit for a high-tech future.

And we need a country that works for everyone – because, as I said at the start, what is progress for our society, if we're not doing more for the people who start out with the biggest disadvantages? A strong society, a strong economy, does not leave people behind.

It's time to raise our ambitions, to expect more and to expect better for every child, whatever their background.

And to build a country where everyone can make the most of themselves.

Thank you.