

Universities Minister addresses sector ahead of academic year

Good morning,

I am delighted to be speaking to you today.

It is a shame that I cannot address you in person but it is a sign of the times that we are now completely used to talking to one another by screens. Yet only six months ago this would have seemed quite strange.

Let's face it – there have not been many upsides to the pandemic. But the resilience and innovation that you have shown has not only been impressive, but has also led to changes in the delivery and accessibility of Higher Education forever.

So, I would like to begin by thanking you and congratulating you for the leadership that you have brought to bear in this global crisis.

Let's be honest, these months have been incredibly difficult, for everyone involved.

And I have recognised the speed and agility shown by universities, how you have moved provision online, in some cases in just 24 hours, to make sure all your students were able to continue their studies.

We know that universities have a reputation for innovation, after all, it is what you do, but to see it transforming the learning experience for thousands of young people, that has been a revelation.

Take St George's University of London, where they have created virtual ward rounds with virtual patients, to mimic clinical decision making for their medical students.

While Master's students at Imperial College went on a virtual trip to the Pyrenees, conducting field work from hi-res photographs, Google Earth, and drone-scanned models of geological formations.

And Performing Arts students at Northampton University continued rehearsals of Shakespeare plays on video conferencing apps and completed two 90-minute films for their final production.

And now – now you are accepting a record percentage of 18-year-olds into university this year and a record level of disadvantaged students this year.

So it is thanks to you, that so many young people will still be able to fulfil their dream of studying at university. It is thanks to you, that our country still punches above its weight in the global higher education rankings.

But I do not for a minute think this has been easy – you have navigated through lockdown and we have worked together to admit as many students as possible this year.

On that note I want to say a special thank you. Thank you for bending over backwards to unlock the dreams and opportunities of this year's cohort.

I know we have supported you with this, but you are the ones that have delivered on our agreed pledge to take all students this year and only offer deferred places as a last resort.

This pledge was agreed at the Higher Education Taskforce that I set up last month bringing representatives together from across the sector, including UUK, UCAS and the Office for Students.

My number one priority was to ensure that we support you to increase capacity, so that as many students as possible can study at their preferred university which their grades unlock.

This is exactly why we announced the removal of student number controls; why we announced the removal of student number caps for medical, dentistry and veterinary medical places.

It is why I established a sub working group on placements and have also worked with the Health Secretary to ensure we could add more placements for students in areas such as medicine and nursing.

That's why we announced a £10million capital fund, so providers will be able to buy equipment, and undertake and accelerate capital projects to enable them to take on additional students. And that's why we announced additional T Grant funding for high costs subjects.

But now we face new challenges and more than ever I want us to put students first in this post-COVID age.

The next few months will be very different for you and I want to thank you for all the hard work that you have done to ensure that social distancing measures are introduced, plus blended learning and Covid-secure measures

We agree with you – it is absolutely imperative that both students and staff are kept safe. Which is why we have updated guidance based on the most recent SAGE advice for higher education.

The Prime Minister announced a cautious road map to unlocking our society and economy and Universities are a vital part in this.

In fact, the latest Higher Education guidance from SAGE points to ramifications of not opening on student health – stating: “There is evidence of physical and mental health impacts from missing or limited access to education.”

However, all the rules and processes in the world will make no impact unless they are followed and together we need to reinforce this message to all

students and staff.

We as government will lead from the front, building on our guidance with a communications plan. But we are also strongly looking to you to continue to uphold your duty of care and responsibility to student and staff health and wellbeing, by following our guidance, reinforcing the importance of it and also enforcing it – both for students and staff.

Because the reality is that campuses can only stay open if the guidance is followed.

We must be clear that the position is one of – use the measures & follow the guidance or lose access to an open campus. Because, safety is paramount for both universities and the communities they are embedded in.

Now I want to acknowledge that I realise in the midst of all this, the last thing any of you need at this time is a load of red tape to wade through.

Responding to a pandemic, making decisions swiftly – all this demands an agile and immediate reaction and a clear sense of purpose.

So for this reason, having worked closely with the science minister, Amanda Solloway and the minister for innovation, Lord Bethell, today I am announcing a range of measures to reduce the bureaucratic burden across higher education and to free up your time to prioritise frontline teaching and research.

I want to help you focus your time and efforts on putting students first, not endless data.

And I am pleased to tell you, that we have worked with the OfS, UKRI and the Department of Health and Social Care to identify a number of sources of unnecessary bureaucracy that will be removed immediately, and we are going to look to cut this further with a system-wide review over the coming months.

I want you to have the time to focus on delivering high quality education – not on filling out forms.

So the measures outlined in today's policy document include: reductions in the data universities and other HE providers will need to supply; reductions in monitoring measures, and reviews of data collections, including a wholesale review of the National Student Survey.

In addition, UKRI is implementing a set of major changes to how it works with applicants for funding, aimed at reducing the burden placed on researchers and innovators applying to UKRI whilst ensuring investment continues in the best ideas and people.

This builds on reforms that regulators, funding bodies and institutions are already making. This must be a continuing, collective effort in which you and all providers have a part to play.

In essence, my message here is clear – I do not want you weighed down with paperwork. Because you are in the business of educating, researching, as well

as transforming and catapulting lives.

With this in mind, I also want to help you to maximise your role by enabling you to be more flexible and accessible.

Now I know universities are certainly no strangers to flexible learning from accelerated two-year degrees, degree apprenticeships, support for part-time learners, Institutes of Technology and other work to develop high quality higher technical education.

And we have exempted STEM subjects from restrictions on loan funding and introduced conversion courses in a wider range of subjects, including Artificial Intelligence for example.

Because in a rapidly changing technological environment it is vital that people have more opportunities to change career.

The Institute of Coding for example has developed bite-sized, short online courses in digital skills which launched in December 2019 and already has nearly 500,000 students.

But, we must build on this momentum.

You will know that I have spoken before about how our rigid Higher Education system needs to be opened up and I fully understand that we need to give you the tools and support to do this.

Our system incentivises and promotes the traditional three-year course. It does not enable readily accessible bitesized learning for people looking to upskill and reskill.

Yet the labour market today is made up of people who do multiple careers in one lifetime. So, I want to enable you to feed this need and also foster a culture of lifelong learning.

You will remember that the Augar review looked in detail at flexible learning and argued for widespread changes to the organisation and funding of higher education to enable that flexibility. And we will respond in parallel with the Spending Review. Rest assured, the global pandemic has not and will not throw us off course.

Because I am determined to ensure we support you to drive up the quality in Higher Education, increase the flexibility and accessibility plus continue to put students at the heart of all our decision making.

This brings me onto my final point today, something that worries me deeply. The mental health pressures that the past few months have placed on students – exacerbating and creating mental problems.

The mental health and wellbeing of students is one of my top priorities and let's face it – a critical part of each university's offer to students is increasingly their wellbeing and mental health support.

Supporting young people as they make the step up from school or college is absolutely vital in helping them to get the most out of their experience at university.

But now – now they have experienced something so very different with months out of formal education.

Research shows the majority of young people arrive at university unprepared for what it is like to live independently. So, imagine how this year's cohort will feel?

I have worked with the Office for Students to help identify that providers can draw upon Student Premium funding worth around £256 million for the academic year 2020/21 towards student hardship funds, including paying for mental health support.

And when the pandemic struck, I wrote to all Universities and HE providers asking them to make sure that they continue to support students, including by bolstering welfare services.

And I want to thank you, and congratulate you, for your response. Welfare teams were quick off the mark in transforming mental health and wellbeing services and I have seen so many examples of good practice.

Such as, the University of Roehampton's proactive student support which saw over 5,000 students receive a phone call from their academic guidance tutor within the first three weeks of remote delivery. This was followed up by further calls and guidance to support them in getting access to the learning and university support services they needed.

Whereas the University of Northampton also moved their counselling services to over the phone, and provided video support and instant chat messaging. The team set up a service that mirrored the normal daily drop-in service, enabling students to book a drop-in slot by ordering a free ticket via Eventbrite.

And Just last month I announced some important additional support to students during this time.

The Student Space platform which has been funded by £3million from the Office for Students and is led by mental health charity Student Minds. It is designed to bridge the gaps in support for students arising from this unprecedented situation generated by the pandemic and works alongside existing services.

Students can access this support directly by phone or text and there are a range of resources available on the website. It also gives details of the support available at each university, and their tools to help students.

Mental health is an area I intend to keep shining a light on – to support our students with the challenges that they may face, arguably – more important now than ever.

So, in conclusion I want to reiterate my thanks. From entirely online Freshers' fairs at Coventry University, to the 'Survive and Thrive' seminars at Buckinghamshire New University.

I am confident that you are all going the extra mile to put students during this pandemic, so thank you.