

Universities Minister at UCAS's Annual Admissions Conference

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me today.

I wanted to start by really taking the opportunity to thank you all, and everyone in the higher education sector, for your inspirational response to this pandemic.

Coming together for events like we are today reminds us of the incredible impact that you have had on people's lives.

You have kept people learning despite a once in a century pandemic so that they didn't have to put their lives on hold.

You have kept your world-beating research alive, and if anyone has any doubt about your impact on the everyday life of people in our country, I would say look no further than the Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine, which has been a key weapon in our fight against the virus.

The last year has been particularly hard for students and school pupils. I don't need to tell you how challenging it's been for them.

We have seen, as schools reopened for all pupils, pupils and teachers both delighted to be back.

The sentiment is very much the same for those students at university who are studying creative and practical courses. They've expressed to me just how happy they are to be back at university, and back to face to face teaching.

Now I know the remaining students who are not yet back are also eager to return and I get and appreciate just how hard it is for them.

We are currently reviewing the data and we will get those remaining students back as soon as we possibly can, based on the data and the latest advice and we'll give at least one week's notice.

As you will all be aware, because of the disruption the pandemic has caused A level, GCSE and most vocational exams won't proceed this summer and instead we have decided that teachers will determine students' grades.

We have made this decision because it is simply the fairest way to determine grades this year, given the sheer impact and disruption of the pandemic. And it is vitally important that no student misses out on those opportunities and the opportunity to embark on the next chapter of their lives because of the pandemic.

I want to thank everyone at UCAS and all university admissions teams for your continued flexibility in making this ambition a shared reality.

Throughout this pandemic we have prioritised education but it has only been made possible and enabled by you. By being so flexible and accommodating and investing time in creating innovative digital solutions.

It is the theme of flexibility that I would actually like to speak to today – and how we can unlock and open up our education system together to expand opportunities for all. In Higher Education, Further Education and in Apprenticeships but also so that those individuals can go on to get jobs that they find rewarding and that fill our skills gaps and boost our productivity.

Let's start with the facts.

Our productivity levels are only four per cent higher than they were in 2008.

The Employer Skills Survey of 2019 suggested there were 214,000 vacancies which employers were unable to fill because they could not find people with the right skills, right qualifications, or experience.

This equates to 24% of all vacancies. 24% is a staggering figure.

And analysis by McKinsey suggests that this is growing. It suggests there is a growing demand for skills, and an increasing skills mismatch, with around seven million additional workers predicted to be under skilled by 2030.

So we need to do something about how people learn in our country if we are going to ensure the next decade is as prosperous as the previous one.

That does not just mean improving our skills system incrementally.

It means wholesale change of our skills system to bring it into the 21st century.

Part of that must include challenging misconceptions and outdated views including that university is the only route to a successful life. When Apprenticeships and FE can in fact be a better route for some. A take which I know those of you at UCAS also share.

We also need to tackle head on the barriers to studying at university in later life – education should never be seen as a boat that arrives at a port once a day – more as a ferry that makes regularly crossing everyday.

This is why the PM's Life Long Learning Entitlement will revolutionise opportunities – available to all and at all stages of life and ages so people can train, retrain and upskill throughout their lives.

In the simplest terms, I believe that a good education can lead to a better life. And I have no doubt you all share that view. We often say that a good education is the foundation upon which people build their lives. I think it should also be seen as the mortar that they need to keep on building. Here in the UK the term education is often associated with young people and children learning but it should be a lifelong undertaking of learning, especially given how fast technology can change entire sectors.

Now changing this ethos won't happen overnight, but I ask you today to assist me and to assist our government on this mission as we make this vision possible with the PM's life long learning entitlement.

We want to break down these barriers, because this Government will always stand up for those who want to make a better life for themselves.

That is why we want to make it easier for everyone, at any stage of their life, to get the best education possible.

As Universities Minister, and the first in my own family to have gone to university, I want every person with a genuine desire and aptitude to succeed at university to have the opportunity to do so.

But as I mentioned, it is not the only route to success and equally nor should the door be viewed as shut to those later in life.

Why do some people view it as shut? Because it is hard to take three years out of full time employment when you have a mortgage, children or caring responsibilities – that's why we need to facilitate the growth of modular provision with a loan system to accommodate it. That's at the heart of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and not just for Higher Education but Further Education too. This will revolutionise our education offering.

I entered politics to create opportunities and this flagship policy will do just that – enabling those who had never dreamt that Higher Education was for them, or who thought it was too far away or impossible to study at university, or those who had longed to do a Higher Technical Qualification to seek their dream job but felt it was all too late.

So how will it work?

It will give people a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime.

It gives more choice to more people and more opportunities to learn the way they want to, to fit into their lives.

The loan will be available for study at higher technical and degree levels regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities – or in our Institutes of Technology, where there have already been fantastic examples of collaboration which are starting to deliver the higher technical STEM skills our nation so badly needs.

In order to create a flexible system which responds to the learner needs, people will be able to use this loan for modular learning as well of course as full time study over a number of years.

And for those of you that know me will know just how passionate I am about Modular learning. Because it really will be a game changer both in terms of social mobility and our levelling up agenda but also to fill our skills shortages and boost our productivity.

The data backs this up. Recent polling from Universities UK shows 82 per cent of prospective students in England who are either unemployed, at risk of unemployment, or looking to learn new skills would be keen to study individual modules at a university degree level.

The polling showed that modular study has the potential to increase the number of people with high level skills in the UK. Some 13 per cent of those who are interested in university education say they are not likely to study part time but are interested in modular study.

So, there is a demand there that I believe we should be looking to meet, especially in industries with significant skills shortages, such as engineering, which we know is the second most popular subject choice for modular study.

We will consult on the detail and scope of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement this year and will set out proposals for how we introduce this reform and consensus on how it can really benefit students and enable providers to put on the type of courses which will fill these skills gaps.

But make no mistake, this is real, transformative change.

It will transform the education system and ensure people can learn throughout their lives, so they are not trapped in a vicious cycle of low-paid work – or unemployment.

It will make us into a fairer country where you have opportunities to train and retrain whether you are 18 or 48.

It will set us on a path to a highly skilled nation so that you can get highly-paid, rewarding jobs whether you're from Surrey or Sunderland.

The education system has highlighted just how flexible it can be in the last year and now we need to move up a gear and make it a permanent feature of our education system.

On another note, there is another route which we will all recognise as boosting social mobility is degree apprenticeships.

There is a growing consensus that these qualifications deliver for society and for students. Parents in my own constituency time after time tell me how they want their child to explore this option – given that they give that real on the job work and the ability to earn whilst they learn. I also hear the same message from young people who tell me how they would love the opportunity to study a degree apprenticeships. However they also talk to me about the limited availability and lack of subject choice.

My message today is we need to expand upon those options so that degree apprenticeships are available to all those who have the grades and the desire to pursue this option.

Now is the time to seize on the growing momentum.

Again they also open up Higher Education to those who might not have considered higher education as an option and give the chance to pursue a career path that brings the benefits of a degree-level education.

I believe choice is fundamental. And yes, higher education is not the right path for all, but it should be available with flexibility and choice so that all those with the grades and desire to peruse it can do so.

When we're honest, choice is what is missing. Now don't get me wrong, we have a great range of degree apprenticeships in the UK ranging from Automotive, Digital, Engineering, Nursing, Chartered Surveying, Aerospace and Nuclear but the list is certainly not exhaustive. This list does not include all the industries we need to be billing into the pipelines of the labour market, or all the subject areas young people have told me they would like to be offered.

And there are now 266 industry-designed apprenticeship standards available at levels 4 to 7, of which 97 include a degree.

So whilst we have these world beating high quality degree apprenticeships – we need to ensure that more can be offered so that there can be a wealth of choice for students

There is good reason to ensure this happens, there is so much widespread agreement about the impact of Degree apprenticeships. Employers, providers and apprentices alike are positive about degree apprenticeships, including their potential to improve productivity, as well as helping widen participation in employment and higher education.

During this year's National Apprenticeship Week we published our Higher and Degree listing of apprenticeships at Level 4 to 7, and I encourage employers recruiting from summer 2021 onwards to take a look at how these can work for your business.

Today, I am asking clearly for more universities to look seriously at these qualifications and I will work with you to iron out and remove the barriers you may face.

I believe they can be a real alternative to a traditional three-year degree, which remains out of grasp still for too many people and you have the ability to put it back into their grasp.

I believe that boosting the number of degree apprenticeships choices will lead to greater social mobility, which remains one of my foremost priorities.

And this is also the key priority for my department – which is why we are conducting a review of our admissions system – which needs reform. We need to level the playing field by modernising the system for example we know that predicted grades play a particularly important part of the current system yet they under grade students from disadvantaged backgrounds

It is a system that we now know disadvantages many already disadvantaged students.

Our consultation on Post-Qualification Admissions will be open until May 13 and I encourage all of you, if you have not already, to express your views on admissions reform because we need to get this right, working hand in hand with you.

In conclusion I would like to thank you for your time today

I do believe that together we have an opportunity now to make our education system more flexible including at the higher level.

By doing so, we will be helping all those who have the ability, attainment and desire to pursue higher education by giving them high quality options that will lead to the good graduate jobs – that will in turn transform their lives.

I know that in the last year the pace of change has been astronomical, and that it can be difficult to think beyond this pandemic.

But the work you have done throughout the last year has already laid the foundations to help us level up education and make our universities even better.

And I believe that by coming together, we will be able to rise to the challenges of the future.

With a more flexible – skills driven – education system that will meet the needs of the labour market of tomorrow but also fulfil the dreams of so many.