

Universities Minister puts quality at the heart of higher education

Good afternoon. Let me start by thanking UCAS for inviting me to speak here today, and a very warm welcome to colleagues from across the sector.

I am sure everyone will be relieved to hear that we are not here today to talk about Covid, but instead we are in a position to talk about the exciting future that lays ahead for our sector.

And that is thanks to the extraordinary work of everyone in further and higher education over the last two years, from estate staff to lecturers, exam staff to UCAS administrators – everyone should be proud of the part they played in helping to keep us moving forward into the future.

Because the fact is that the UK's future is significantly dependent on further education, higher education and ultimately on skills.

The issues that we as a society are going to face tomorrow, are the issues that our education system needs to produce problem-solving talent for today.

Think about the future of the UK's employment market, of key skills, the future of our infrastructure, our families, our climate, our NHS – all of these pillars of future Britain rely on a higher education system that produces remarkable quality, both in teaching and in outcomes.

Few could have imagined 30 years ago that there would be 53 British unicorn companies that reached valuations of over a billion dollars each – and that two-thirds of these companies would have been founded by UK higher education graduates.

It's no wonder then that some of our most well known university cities – Cambridge, Oxford, Bristol, Manchester and London – all consistently feature in Europe's Top 20 cities for tech investment.

What's more, it's not just our own country's future that relies on the UK's education system.

Not only have we beaten our target for international students 10 years early, but right now, there are 57 of the world's Premiers, Prime Ministers and Presidents who were educated in British universities.

And on average, our system has produced a Nobel prize winner every year for the last two decades. I therefore have no doubt that everyone in this room agrees, that the UK's future relies heavily on the future of our higher education system.

So what I want to answer today is two-fold: what does the future hold for higher education, and how are we building that future.

To me, the answer is relatively simple: Quality, transparency and fairness. Quality in teaching and outcomes. Transparency for students. Fairness for students and staff.

It is no secret that quality is what makes our higher education system so outstanding. Quality is the reason that 4 of the Top 10 universities in the world are British.

What we as a small island have managed to achieve in higher education is nothing short of extraordinary.

But we cannot expect to be able to sit back and quietly polish our world-class reputation in a globalised higher education market.

A defensive game when it comes to quality will not do.

We have to be bold enough to identify where quality is slipping in our system and stamp out complacency. We have to be prepared to be robust and rigorous in maintaining standards if we want our future to be as successful as our present.

UCAS and many of the vice chancellors here today have been fantastic allies and leaders in driving up quality.

But despite the enormous successes, it is unacceptable that right now, at 25 universities and other providers, less than half of students who begin a degree can expect to graduate and find professional employment or further study within 15 months.

And this is not unique to any one subject.

There are 5 providers with drop-out rates above 40% in Business and Management; 8 providers with drop-out rates above 40% in Computing, and 4 providers where fewer than 60% of Law graduates go on to graduate jobs or further study.

What message does that send to the talented prospective students of the future?

Imagine how many of this country's future entrepreneurs, tech-leaders and highly skilled employees we are letting down by allowing pockets of poor quality to form.

Perhaps most strikingly, we know that poor quality can hit the talented disadvantaged the hardest.

Those for whom university is a new and unfamiliar world are at once both our bright stars of the future & simultaneously are most at risk of not realising that talent because of poor quality courses.

This is not the future I would want for children in my constituency, and I doubt it is a future anyone here would want for their own children.

So we have been bold when it comes to quality. We have looked at how quality has been driven up in other sectors and we have worked with the OfS on innovative, student-focussed solutions led by common sense.

So the OfS will now be setting minimum requirements for completion rates and graduate outcomes.

No longer will it be possible for a provider to short- change students, year after year, with courses that do not improve their lives after graduation.

Students will be able to select their course knowing that the government is ensuring a minimum acceptable standard for quality and outcome.

Supporting this, we are re-vamping our clear labelling system – the Teaching Excellence Framework. This system will continue to signal high quality to students and parents through a simple Gold, Silver or Bronze rating – celebrating all of the successes of our finest institutions.

Those universities not demonstrating excellence in their provision will face receiving a 'Requires Improvement' rating from the TEF, which allows students to make properly informed decisions about whether or not to study there.

And today, I am announcing a further important innovation in our drive toward better quality and transparency to put students in the driving seat enabling them to make informed choices.

Talking about informed choices – I expect many of you here will be getting public transport home today, and chances are you will see an advertisement for two things on your way home: credit cards and universities.

When you look at the credit card advertisement, you'll notice that no matter what the sales line is, or how appealing the wider terms, the APR is written in black and white at the bottom.

This information is there because of a conscious decision by government to ensure that consumers can make informed decisions before they make such a significant financial and time commitment.

But then glance over to the university advertisement next to it. You will notice that in sharp contrast, bold claims about career enhancement and graduate salaries are not backed up with the real information, despite the financial exposure of most courses being greater than most credit limits.

And for anyone with the data to hand, the potential for students to be misled could not be clearer.

For instance one advert I have seen suggests a particular psychology course gives students access to their state-of-the-art research facilities, but it doesn't state that one third of their psychology students drop out prior to completing their degree.

Of course, it is absolutely legitimate and right for a university to promote its best features, whether that is a high NSS score, the friendliness of its

campus or its distinctive style of teaching. But that is not a reason not to give applicants the hard facts.

This is about focussing on empowering students and recognising that significant financial and time commitments should be sold transparently when it comes to quality.

So as of today, I am asking that all adverts in next year's admissions cycle – whether they are online, on a billboard or in a prospectus – take the simple, easy step of providing comparable data on the percentage of students who have completed that course, and the percentage of them who have gone into either professional employment or further advanced study.

Just like a credit card advertisement including information about APR, university adverts will reflect the need for students to understand where a course can take them, and give them the information they need to choose the course that fits their goals.

The three quality drivers of minimum standards, proper labelling and transparent advertising are simple, student-focused steps that will help to maintain the extraordinary level of quality we already offer in UK Higher Education.

And I want to work with colleagues in this room every step of the way to make sure we get this right.

That's why I will be convening an advisory group, with representatives of UUK, GuildHE, UCAS and the OfS amongst others, so that we can put out guidance on this matter by the end of spring, in time for the coming application cycle.

I said earlier that our approach to the future of higher education also relied on another pillar of UCAS' values – fair access.

The gradual evolution in higher education that we have seen over the last ten years has been thanks to the collaborative work between Government, UCAS and other sector bodies.

The fact that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds went to university this year than ever before in history, and that a disadvantaged 18-year-old is 82% more likely to go to university today than they were in 2010 are triumphs, but I am afraid not the finish line.

This month, we welcomed our new Director of Fair Access and Participation to his role.

John Blake will be working to ensure universities rewrite their access and participation plans to include better, more focused and more transparent targets.

We need to focus not just on getting people through the door, but on to high quality courses that they will complete and lead to a graduate job.

Universities whose plans rely on putting disadvantaged students on courses with outcomes below the OfS' minimum thresholds need to up their game.

We will also be working with John and others to increase the proportion of students studying degree apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications and part time courses, and of course we will ensure that the future of higher education is one that is even more welcoming to students from a disadvantaged background than ever before.

We are therefore not limiting ourselves in scope. We want universities to work with local schools and FE colleges to raise attainment early on in a prospective student's journey, allowing them to go on to achieve more when they move on to higher education.

And I want to thank Clare Marchant and everyone at UCAS for warmly welcoming John.

I said a moment ago that we can be proud of our higher and further education systems.

But while it is not often you will hear a Conservative minister say so, when it comes to the future, we need a revolution.

The skills and the career paths that we need to fuel our country's successful future require us to completely change the way people learn through higher and further education.

The revolution I am referring to is of course the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, or LLE.

For too long HE has been predominantly undertaken between the ages of 18- 22 and our system has not supported or developed a culture of lifelong learning.

That is why we will be creating a student finance system that is fit for the 21st Century that will enable individuals to reskill and upskill, ignite a culture of lifelong learning and – I believe – serve to further prove that education is the engine powering our levelling up agenda.

Let's face it, we need a system that matches the flexibility of modern careers with the flexibility of learning and can help address skills shortages.

As set out by the Prime Minister last year, the LLE will provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education.

The LLE can then be used flexibly across their lifetime, full or part time, for modules or for qualifications in one go, in universities or colleges.

As I have spoken about before it will help therefore both change the way learners use and understand the student finance system, and will make it simpler, easier and more accessible, including for those who previously never thought that higher education was possible for them.

So from 2025, we will have LLE accounts.

New students will be able to sign up and log in online to find a lifelong loan entitlement worth the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to be used across higher and further education as they choose.

Their loan entitlement can fund flexible study, whether full courses or module-by-module, as-and-when they want throughout their life.

LLE turns education from a narrow, set destination into to an accessible, flexible journey.

It is a journey that can stop and start when you like.

Above all, it is a system that will support a lifelong learning culture that will improve opportunities, support businesses and in turn increase our productivity.

I do think it is worth pointing out once again, that we are the first country in the world to implement this at scale,

This puts us in a brilliant position to have an education system and an economy that work hand-in-glove together to produce a highly skilled, highly paid workforce of the future.

However, it is not just economics and outcomes that the future of higher education relies upon.

Transparency and fairness are ingrained in our national identity. After all we are a nation of diligent queue-ers and compulsive apologisers – transparency and fairness permeates all aspects of society and perhaps none more so than on university campuses.

Students are increasingly socially conscious and having worked their socks off to get into university, they expect transparency and fairness in every aspect of university life.

It is thanks to UCAS that students have such confidence in the fairness and openness of our application process.

Concerns raised recently by Professor Lee Elliot-Major, amongst others, about the personal statements element of the process exemplify this, and I have always felt that personal statements in their current form favour the most advantaged students.

So I'm pleased that UCAS have confirmed that reform of the personal statement is in their plans so that personal statements works to the benefit of all students. And I look forward to working with them on this important reform.

I am delighted to see UCAS's continued commitment to transparency. And I say this because there is an area of university life where there is not only a lack of transparency and fairness, but where action is actively being taken to obscure and pervert these values.

The use of non-disclosure agreements to silence victims of sexual harassment, abuse or bullying is an unjustifiable, immoral practice and one that I am determined to see confined to the past rather than continued into the future.

Last year, I wrote to all Vice Chancellors making my position clear, and last month I was delighted to meet with the charity Can't Buy My Silence and others in the sector to encourage university leaders to sign a pledge to end the misuse of NDAs.

Such agreements make it harder for other victims to come forward and help hide perpetrators behind a cloak of anonymity, and frankly when used in this way, they should have no place in our higher education system. Today, I want to reiterate my call on all Vice Chancellors to join the 30 providers that have already signed the pledge and be on the right side of history when it comes to protecting students and staff from this kind of abuse in the future.

I also want to once again spell out that I am personally committed to securing lasting change on this.

I said at the start that an extraordinary future for higher education means an extraordinary future for the UK. Hopefully from what I have said today, it is clear that both are possible.

But if we are going to achieve the future we all want, we have to be bold enough to assert that quality, access and transparency must form the foundations of that future.

So what does that future look like?

To me, it is a future of students empowered by quality labelling to make the decisions that are right for them, where they are in the driving seat.

The Lifelong Loan Entitlement provides an opportunity for a future of flexible, modularised learning that fits modern career paths and fills skills gaps with home-grown talent.

And lastly, it is a future in which the UK is the fairest and most transparent place to go to university in the world.

Our higher education system is fast becoming the global leader in this space, matching students expectations and values with action.

Above all, it is a future that we cannot build without all of those in this room and in our sector.

I have no doubt that if we commit to our values of quality, fair access and transparency, an extraordinary future awaits us. Thank you.