

Universities Minister sets out support for international students

Measures to support international students and the higher education sector against the global challenges coronavirus poses were outlined by the Universities Minister today (5 June).

Speaking at the British Council's Going Global online event today, Michelle Donelan emphasised that the UK's world-leading universities remain open to international students, and the Government is working as a priority to make processes as flexible and easy as possible to allow them to study at UK institutions under the current circumstances.

The Minister highlighted a range of support measures for students, including flexibility on visa regulations, as well as announcing the appointment of Sir Steve Smith as an International Education Champion to boost the numbers of international students in the UK.

The role of the Champion will be to work with organisations across the breadth of the education sector, including universities, schools, the EdTech industry, vocational training, and early years schooling providers. The Champion will also target priority regions worldwide to build networks and promote the UK as the international education partner of choice.

The appointment of Sir Steve Smith fulfils a headline action from the International Education Strategy, published by DfE and DIT in March last year. The former Exeter University vice-chancellor will spearhead overseas activity and address a number of market access barriers on behalf of the whole education sector, including concerns over the global recognition of UK degrees.

Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan said:

"International students are an integral part of our society, culture and economy and we are proud that so many international students come here every year to study. That is why I want to stress to overseas students at this unprecedented time that they will always be welcome in this country.

"Supporting international students is one of our top priorities and we are working hard to make sure we are as flexible as possible and make processes as easy as they can be, including around current visa regulations.

"Now, more than ever, it is critical we work together internationally, sharing our knowledge to mitigate the challenges we all face. I am delighted to announce Sir Steve Smith as the International Education Champion, a role that will be integral to our outward-looking approach to international education, from early years through to higher education."

Minister for Exports, Graham Stuart MP:

"I'd like to extend my congratulations to Sir Steve Smith on his new role as International Education Champion. I'm proud to lead the Department for International Trade's education work and to have published our International Education Strategy with the appointment of a Champion at its heart. The UK's education sector is world leading and world class, and we need to ensure that it stays that way.

"Education spending will continue to rise around the world and the UK is well placed to grow its exports and contribute to millions of lives. I look forward to working with Sir Steve to promote and highlight the UK as the international education partner of choice.

"International trade is critical to the UK's coronavirus recovery plan and we need to ensure that our education sector plays a full role in meeting global need and helping both the UK and its partners to come back from the economic impacts of the virus."

In his new role, Sir Steve Smith will also highlight exporting opportunities for the sector and help to address any challenges and barriers to growth. Education exports are currently valued at more than £21 billion per year and help to forge global and meaningful relationships. These underpin opportunities for the UK and international partners to develop, trade and collaborate. This will prove crucial as the UK begins to recover from the economic impact of coronavirus (COVID-19).

The Universities Minister acknowledged the vital part international students play in the UK's higher education agenda and highlighted the work from the Government and institutions to ensure the safety and wellbeing of current and prospective international students, as well as ensuring access to high quality teaching and learning.

A letter from the Universities Minister to international students last month detailed a number of measures designed to safeguard students from the impacts of Covid-19 and enable them to continue their studies as planned.

These include temporary concessions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 and ensure the immigration system is as flexible as possible, the launch of the new points-based Student route later this year and the new Graduate Route in the summer of 2021, which will enable international students who have been awarded their degree to stay and work in the UK at any skill level for two years.

The Government has also worked closely with the Office for Students, the independent higher education regulator in England, to ensure students are able to continue their studies, receive good quality provision and work towards a degree that they and future employers value.

Sir Steve Smith will join the role from Exeter University, where he was Vice-Chancellor for 18 years, following over 20 years of university leadership both in the UK and internationally.