

Universities Minister speech at Festival of Higher Education

Good morning, I am delighted by this opportunity to speak at this celebration of higher education.

We have so much to celebrate, especially now. Over the last few months we have seen our HE sector really step up and innovate in the face of adversity. Putting students' wellbeing at the heart of their plans and acting quickly with innovative solutions to support learning.

In fact we have seen some fantastic examples including in practical and creative subjects. I was very impressed for example by my virtual visit of the Royal College of Music especially the staff and student feedback.

Whilst The University of Essex created a virtual residency for a theatre director, sending Virtual Reality headsets to students (some as far away as Singapore) to allow them to watch her production as if they were in the theatre.

Where as Petroleum Geoscience masters students at Imperial College, replaced their cancelled trip to the Pyreenees with a simulated overseas field trip, carrying out a regimented schedule of virtual field work. The field trip took place in an entirely new format in what is thought to be a first in a UK university setting at masters level. In fact, there have been so many fantastic examples of innovation across the board

I have also highlighted before the sterling effort Universities have made in the community fight back against Covid 19 from making and donating PPE to offering up equipment and accommodation.

And we certainly should celebrate that our world class scientists and researchers at the University of Oxford are at the forefront of vaccine development

I want you to know that I understand how hard this time has been for both University leaders and staff. This period has been hard for everyone but having to make such fundamental changes in course delivery almost overnight has been no mean feat!

Nor has it been easy to ensure students have all the support they need – but you have risen to the challenge. And I understand that financial uncertainty has added to those pressures. Which is why we announced our 4th May stabilisation package, the university research support package in June, and why we announced extra support in the form of the Restructuring Regime.

In doing so, we will be acting to support students, to protect our world-class research base and in recognition of the critical role that universities play in their local regions and economies.

Today I thought I would share a little about my journey. I entered politics to create opportunities and unlock potential. I was the first in my family to go to university. So, I know directly the power of university to open up opportunities and to transform lives.

However, we must always keep in mind that it is not the only path. As I have said before, there should be no one size fits all policy – for some FE will support their goals more or an apprenticeship will catapult their ambitions whilst for others HE will be transformative.

Let us however remember that we should rightly be proud of our Universities. Our Universities do play an instrumental role in their local communities and regions and with 4 of the world's top 10 universities we are leading the way in terms of academic knowledge and research.

I have seen the power of opportunities and I was blessed to be granted them myself. I also know what it is like for doors to shut and my mission is to enable them to open for those with the grades to unlock them.

Now is the time for a new era in which our world leading sector will go from strength to strength. One with a focus on the individual, on skills, on rigorous academic standards and on outcomes to fill our productivity gap, fuel our economy and create opportunities.

I must say that I was delighted the Office for Students took firm action in early July to stamp out conditional unconditional offers. The registration condition is of course only temporary – but I want to see the practice ending for good. Because again I don't want to see students making decisions that are not in their best interests. There is no justification for such practices.

Of course, this was only on a minority of courses. And I want to stress this point and it is exactly why we continue to be world leading: the majority of students get a good outcome from their studies and gaining real benefit from their degree.

We all know, and I certainly do, our academics want what's best for their students. Our attention to student wellbeing as well as learning is one of the reasons why we attract students from around the globe. We have seen that very clearly over recent months, when time and again our higher education sector has stepped forward to play a vital role in the response to COVID-19, whether that is moving courses online or enhancing their support for the disadvantaged.

I also want to celebrate the fantastic reputation that our higher education sector has internationally. It is quite right that the UK is increasingly a destination of choice for top students from across the world. And I am determined to build on that and have thrown my full support behind the sector. In fact, in recognition of the impact COVID-19 is having on international students, I have made the case across Government to ensure we are as flexible as we can be.

These flexibilities include enabling international students to complete blended learning for the upcoming academic year. We have also confirmed that undergraduate and master's graduates, will benefit from two years of leave in the UK to work, or look for work, under the new, globally competitive, Graduate route, when it is introduced in Summer 2021. And on 1st July we announced that PhD graduates will benefit from three years of leave.

I am also delighted to have announced Sir Steve Smith as the new International Education Champion, delivering on a key action in Government's 2019 International Education Strategy. Sir Steve will assist with opening up opportunities and tackling challenges to attract international students, support export growth and make new global connections.

I want to do two things in the remainder of my time here today. Firstly, I want to continue to make clear the passionate importance I place on achieving genuine social mobility. And secondly how I believe now is the time to build on the recent innovations that universities have been developing.

I truly believe we need to focus on genuine social mobility. True social mobility is when we put students and their needs and career ambitions first – be that in higher education, further education or apprenticeships.

University was always my dream and it transformed my career options – and I want this option to be open to all those qualified by ability and attainment. Ethnicity, parental affluence or where a student is from should not be a barrier or even a factor.

Nuffield foundation research shows that high ability disadvantaged students are less likely to attend the most selective courses than more advantaged peers with similar grades. We must ensure that all those who have the ability, attainment and desire to pursue higher education are given high quality options that will lead to the good graduate jobs that will transform their lives.

But we need to remember that the focus isn't just about getting young people to university, but about making sure they are on good quality courses that lead to graduate jobs.

To take an example, black children are more likely to go to higher education than white children. By age 19, 59.9% have entered from black ethnic groups, compared to 38.2% from white ethnic groups .

But they are less likely to progress through their course, obtain upper class degrees, and go on to get a graduate job.

Only 85% of undergraduate entrants in England in 2017/18 from black ethnic groups had continued in higher education a year later, compared with 91% of white entrants.

Only 60% of qualifiers in 2018/19 from black ethnic groups obtained a 2:1 or above in their degree, compared with 82% of white qualifiers .

Only 69% of graduates in 2016/17 from black ethnic groups were in highly

skilled employment or higher further study six months after graduating, compared with 74% of white graduates .

So it's too simplistic to just look at the numbers of a group going to university. True social mobility is not getting them to the door, it's getting them to the finish line of a high quality course that will lead them to a graduate job.

And as I've said before, that's why I want to see universities doing even more to raise standards and aspiration in schools. That can be sponsoring schools, supporting a robust curriculum, running summer camps, or appointing student ambassadors to act as role models: universities have the potential here to make a tremendous difference in opening up opportunities.

And while I'm thrilled by the number who are already doing so, I'd like even more high tariff universities to be coming forward to open maths schools.

There are plenty of outstanding organisations that support the sector to support disadvantaged students to achieve. For example, Generating Genius, equips students with STEM knowledge and skills, to support talented students from BAME backgrounds to secure places at top universities and in top businesses. Another excellent example is Zero Gravity, a digital platform which connects state school students from low income backgrounds with undergraduate mentors. The mentors support those students in their journey to highly selective universities by encouraging them and helping them through the university application process. And although it launched only a month ago, thousands of undergraduate mentors have already signed up.

And we can get there because as have such a dynamic, innovative and student-focused HE sector here in the UK.

This is a festival of higher education, and I celebrate the fact we have some of the best universities in the world. We are an international leader for research and development.

I have no hesitation in praising the dedication of higher education teaching and research staff across all four nations of the United Kingdom.

They have responded to the challenges of COVID with astonishing innovation. I'm inspired by some of the initiatives I've seen to support mental health, such as universities offering additional student check-in services, where staff have volunteered to provide direct support to students. Others have enhanced their feedback and online wellbeing services.

Now is the time for the sector to build on these innovations. This event is hosted by Buckingham, the home of the two-year degree, I also want the sector to think more about how it delivers learning differently. Sadly, the three-year bachelor's degree has increasingly become the predominant mode of study. But that doesn't suit all students. Many young people would like to earn while they learn.

This fits into my wider message here today – that now is the time to innovate. If COVID has taught us one thing in reference to the HE sector it

is how flexible it is – lets utilise this flexibility. Now is the time to build on the recent innovation we have seen.

With degree apprenticeships that meet employer demand, accelerated degrees, more emphasis on part time learning that links with labour market needs and skills gaps, building on online offerings designed during COVID and also more provision at Levels 4 and 5 offering Higher Technical Education or apprenticeships.

The economy and labour market needs have dramatically changed over the last few decades and it is now the norm for people to have multiple careers. Now is the time and the opportunity for the HE sector to upscale its flexible offering to support upskilling and reskilling.

I want to look at how we can support our universities to become more flexible to this – and more accessible. And rest assured, I want to support you in this mission.

One thing that I'm determined to look at is how we can do more as a Government to enable universities to offer more modular provision.

We know this can be tremendously desirable to adult learners looking to upskill, and it is likely to be more important than ever as the economy recovers from coronavirus.

I will work with you to make this happen because now is the time – the time for innovation and change – change that will safeguard our universities' world leading reputation, continue to raise the quality bar and also feed our economy to tackle our productivity gap and most importantly create opportunities.

So to conclude, our universities have so much to offer this country. They play a critical role in transforming the lives of students, in producing outstanding scientific research and in their local economies and communities. All this is why I care deeply about higher education.

I will continue to champion the sector – Whether that's making sure that the UK is a welcoming and readily accessible destination for international students, or extolling the virtues of our high quality courses. Now really is the time for true social mobility and innovation.