Speech

Education Secretary speaks at launch of digital learning review

Speaking at the launch of the Office for Students' review of digital teaching in higher education, Gavin Williamson discussed the future of online learning.

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From: Department for Education, Office for Students, and The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP

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It is a great pleasure to be joining you today (25 February).

As many of you may know, last summer I asked Sir Michael (Barber) to lead a review of digital teaching and learning in higher education. This was as a direct result of how the pandemic had forced all our schools, colleges and universities to swiftly shift to remote teaching.

Thanks to the incredible efforts that have been made and you all have made. All our learners, whether at school, college or university, have been able to continue with their studies even when they were not able to have in person teaching. I want to take the opportunity to thank you all for this incredible response. I know adapting to it has been really challenging.

But something positive has come out of it. Technology has come into its own and is one of the few causes of celebration in an otherwise grim pandemic. Over the past year we've seen nothing short of a revolution in the way people learn.

I thought it was vital that we did not squander the lessons we can take from that and that we make the most of it in the future.

Before I go any further, I would like to thank you, Sir Michael, for the wisdom you have brought to bear on such an important subject. It is going to serve us well as we rebuild after Covid and support the HE sector to realise the opportunities presented by digital teaching and learning in the future.

It also gives me an opportunity to thank you for your leadership and guidance of the Office for Students (OfS) over the past 3 years. I have enormously valued this, and I'm sure I'm not alone in being better informed because of your insight and advice. I am pleased that our paths will continue to cross in your next role, as you bring your focus on deliverology back to the heart of Government.

As I said, the pandemic has led to a revolution in teaching and learning and the review shows us there have been numerous examples of innovation and creativity with students.

For example, simulations like the ones at Teesside University where radiography students conducted remote experiments using a simulation tool that was built in their School of Health and Life science.

Or the digital labs used by The Open University which connect students to the instruments, data and equipment they need for practical experiments and analysis over the internet. All this creative enterprise is not going to suddenly fizzle out once we move on from Covid. It will be crucial as we build back better.

Government expects higher education providers to ensure all students, regardless of background, can access their studies remotely. We know that investment in digital technology, services and skills can raise standards right across the country.

But not everyone has the tools to take advantage of this which is why we have worked closely with the OfS to make sure that there are hardship funds for universities to support disadvantaged students, including with the purchase of IT equipment.

This includes an additional £70m of hardship funding being made available this financial year – £50m announced this month and £20m in December. This is on top of the £256m of funding higher education providers are able draw on this academic year towards student hardship funds.

This pivot to remote learning and the technology that makes it possible has an even bigger role to play as we build back better.

Last autumn the Prime Minister announced the Lifelong Loan Entitlement as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee.

This is going to turbocharge a truly flexible skills system, so people can build up learning over time. Online and blended learning will play an important role.

The Lifetime Skills Guarantee will revolutionise our education system. It will be as easy to enrol for a certificate in cybersecurity as it is to get a degree in biology; as easy for a forty-five-year-old retail worker to retrain as it is for the 18-year-old to head off to university.

We will establish a flexible lifelong loan entitlement that brings colleges and universities closer together, ending the decades-old bias against technical education.

We know that many learners need to access courses in a more flexible way, to fit study around work, family and personal commitments, and to retrain as both their circumstances and the economy changes. By investing properly in high-quality courses that lead directly to good jobs, the Lifetime Skills Guarantee will transform the opportunities available for young and old alike.

I want to end the dominance of the three-year bachelor's degree in higher education. Whether it's a degree apprenticeship, a Higher National Diploma or a set of modules in engineering and business, for many people there are simply better ways of studying.

Many of our degrees are absolutely fantastic but they should never be the default.

Instead of pushing young people on to dead-end courses that give them nothing but a mountain of debt, we need universities and colleges to work together to address the gaps in our labour market, and create the valuable and technical courses our society needs. I know that they are up for this challenge – indeed, many are already embracing it and already delivering on it.

The Lifetime Skills Guarantee is how we will make this dream a reality, get people into the jobs they aspire to and Build Back Better from this pandemic.

The final point I'd like to make today is about technology's ability to expand our horizons. It is not just about enabling a student studying at home in Runcorn to go on a virtual field trip to the Atlas mountains, it can just as easily bring the student in North Africa here to enjoy the benefits of a British education from their own home.

Education exports such as transnational education make an important contribution to the UK economy as well as helping to build global relationships and education partnerships. Transnational education strengthens the UK's soft power, and will open up opportunities for greater collaboration and the exchange of knowledge.

Online learning has the potential to transform our international offer. Rather than simply delivering degrees on site, in future universities will be able to provide a much wider and more innovative portfolio. We may, perhaps, see degrees in which an international student studies remotely for two years, before completing their degree with an in-person experience year on a UK campus. This sort of change would revolutionise demand, at a stroke bringing a UK degree in reach of the emerging middle classes of India and South East Asia.

Earlier this month we published our updated International Education Strategy, at the heart of which is our new, flagship, Turing Scheme.

The Turing Scheme exemplifies the best of post-Brexit Britain: modern, outward-looking and global in reach. Freed from the bloated, bureaucratic constraints of Erasmus+ - a scheme that would have cost us around £600m per year to run or £2bn net over the programme. We have been able to broaden our imaginations from the small confines of Europe. Seeing Turing as a truly global scheme.

Our universities will now be able to create opportunities not just among our friends and neighbours on the continent, but across the globe; to America's world-renowned institutions and the vibrant, dynamic universities of India and South-East Asia.

And unlike Erasmus, whose benefits went mainly to the middle-classes, the Turing scheme will actively seek out those from less well-off backgrounds to take up opportunities that can transform their lives.

Thanks to the wizardry of technology this is an enormously exciting time for those who learn and those who teach. We mustn't hesitate to seize the opportunities it presents with both hands and I know you have no intention of slowing up a revolution that has been unfolding over the past year. And I want to thank you for what you have been doing and for the endeavours that you're about to embark upon.

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