

Speech

Jo Johnson: Universities UK annual conference 2016

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Universities Minister Jo Johnson speaks to members of Universities UK about the future of higher education.



Good morning everyone.

My thanks to UUK for inviting me to speak today, and to all those involved from Nottingham Trent who have helped to make this conference such a success.

Yesterday saw an important landmark in the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, which was brought before the House of Commons Committee for first evidence session.

I know many of you will share my view that, as the first major legislation since the 1992 reforms, the bill represents a key

moment for English higher education. Personally, I am delighted to be able to take it forward on behalf of both the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

I was excited during the recent machinery of government changes announced in July. Not just because I now have 2 offices within 80 yards of each other, but because the bridging of these 2 departments enables government as a whole, and Whitehall, to fully recognise the important links between universities, the economy and the wider education system, in the domain of the Department for Education.

Our education system is fundamental to the UK's economic future and success, creating the networks, ideas and innovations that will keep us globally competitive. So it's natural in a way that higher education will be at the heart of both the Department for Education's work and the new industrial strategy being led out of BEIS, creating a unified approach to issues such as social mobility and raising attainment.

You know, as I do, that we need this bill to provide stability around a robust regulatory framework, and I was delighted to hear several of you yesterday supporting the case for legislative reform at the evidence sessions. We do need it to join up the regulation of the market, and give us a 'best in class' regulatory system which is, by the way, modelled closely on the UUK work led by Simon Gaskell in 2015. And we need it to ensure that students are protected, and that students and the taxpayer feel that they receive good value for their investment.

The process of Parliamentary scrutiny is obviously extremely important. I am looking forward to the constructive challenges that we will receive with respect to some of the bill's provisions, and I am grateful to the honourable members who have already tabled a range of amendments for debate.

I know that you will play your part in that process and I look forward to working with you to strengthen the bill and what it is trying to do wherever we can. The evidence-based approach adopted by Nicola Dandridge, Julia and the policy team at UUK

is hugely helpful as we seek their and other stakeholder views on the implications of the challenging policy decisions that must be made and I look forward to working closely with you in the coming months.

Usually I'm focused on English HE - but in this forum, it would be remiss of me not to mention the hugely important role of HE in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Wherever we can collaborate we will try to make the most of opportunities to do so, and that approach will continue. I especially welcome the participation of HE in the DAs in year 1 of the TEF - I look forward to working with you on the possibilities for TEF year 2 and beyond, and working with you also in shaping our thinking around the creation of the new research body UK Research and Innovation.

Of course, I also know that we start from a position of real strength. Our universities consistently rank among the best in the world, with 34 institutions in the top 200, and more than twice that number in the top 800.

UK universities are home to both world-class teaching and life-changing research, and they have been for many, many years. To maintain such high standards the Office for Students and UK Research and Innovation must work together, with a comprehensive view of both the HE sector in general and of each individual institution.

This kind of collaboration will be essential in areas as diverse as research degree awarding powers, knowledge exchange funding and activity, and issues of the financial sustainability of HE providers.

These are important topics, and a united approach will ensure that the links between research and teaching, and cross-institution work promoting social, civil and economic impact, are properly reflected in policy.

I know that some have expressed concern about the recent machinery of government changes, specifically where the DfE has responsibility for HE while research policy remains with

BEIS. Rather than seeing this as a complication, however, I see this as indicative of a potentially more joined-up approach across departments, with a range of expertise now being brought in to bolster universities. Both departments are linked by a shared vision of a country in which anyone, regardless of background, will have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and I believe that this collaboration can be a catalyst for a true flourishing of social mobility.

For my part, I am fully committed to my role connecting the 2 departments and I will work closely together with my 2 secretaries of state, Greg Clark and Justine Greening, as well as with the heads of the 2 new bodies that the bill will eventually bring in - we've already got John Kingman acting as the Chair of UKRI, and there will eventually be the new Office for Students too - to ensure a coherent approach, so that day-to-day business can continue. But the point is that the world is changing around us - and the sector needs to change to maintain its global standing.

A major change to our world is of course Brexit. This is not the time to pause on the reforms we have set out in our Higher Education and Reform Bill. Now more than ever we do need to address these issues. As Madeline Ansell, CEO of University Alliance put it: "Uncertainty is destabilising and damaging, and frankly unfair, to the staff and students affected. The fact that this negotiation will be difficult shouldn't be used as an excuse to shelve or delay the HE and Research Bill. It is important for democracy that the laws governing an issue should be set out clearly and (more or less) in a single place." As she put it: "the HE Bill is a raft to calmer waters".

I'm truly glad that UUK, led by Julia and Nicola, has also committed itself to this long-overdue legislation and did not join those relatively few voices out there that were calling for a Brexit-related delay to what is a very long-overdue systemic change on how the sector is organised.

Now I know you will have your concerns about the bill, but it is important that we work together both to seize the opportunities that it and Brexit presents, just as we must also mitigate the

risks. We must ensure that we get the best possible outcome for the UK from our negotiations in the months ahead.

We have already sent a strong message that the UK HE sector remains very much open for business.

Firstly, we gave clear and quick reassurances that rules regarding the student loans for EU nationals were unchanged, and remain in force today. EU students currently eligible to receive funding from the Student Loans Company will continue to do so for current courses and those they are about to start this autumn.

While we are still members of the EU, universities that competitively bid for European Commission Research funding (for example, under Horizon 2020) will have payments of such awards underwritten by the Treasury, even when those projects continue beyond the UK's departure from the EU. And all structural and investment fund projects, including agri-environment schemes, signed before the Autumn Statement will be fully funded, even when these projects continue beyond the UK's departure from the EU. Further details will be forthcoming at the Autumn Statement itself.

This means British businesses and universities will have certainty over future funding, and should continue to bid for competitive EU funds for as long as the UK remains a member of the EU. I was glad yesterday to hear Prof. Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, tell the Bill Committee that "the University of Cambridge has the largest number of awards from the EU of any institution in Europe, continuing to attract considerable sums from the EU even in the current setting."

I obviously recognise that others have a different experience, and there remains a vital role for government to undertake on your behalf. Many of you have personally highlighted outstanding concerns, in particular over the uncertainty for EU students looking to commence their studies in autumn 2017, and their entitlement to loans and 'home fee status'. Others have voiced questions about the position of EU staff who play such a

valuable role in your institutions.

In both these specific cases - but also more broadly - we fully recognise the importance of government providing further clarity. I am working very closely with my colleagues across government in all relevant departments so we can find a rapid way forward that will support your collective interest in these matters.

But these issues are inevitably closely linked to the wider process of exiting the EU and the sequencing is important to get right.

The Prime Minister has been clear that she wants to protect the status of EU nationals already living here, and the only circumstances in which she envisages that wouldn't be possible is if British citizens' rights in European member states were not protected in return.

The decision on when to trigger Article 50, that will start the formal and legal process to leave the European Union, will be taken by the Prime Minister. This won't happen, as it's been said, before the end of 2016, and requires us to have a UK approach and clear objectives for negotiations, and it's in everyone's interests that we establish that before we trigger Article 50.

We will, of course, seek to secure the best possible deal for universities so that we can continue to form productive collaborations across Europe. But I don't want to shy away from some of the difficult challenges that we collectively need to address.

One such challenge is the issue of migration.

The contribution that international students, as Julia said in her remarks, make to the UK's world-class universities is important, and we want our universities to continue to attract the best and brightest students from around the world, those who will be able to benefit from their studies here, contribute to the experience of domestic students, strengthen the UK economy, and build valuable and lasting bridges around the world.

At the same time, the government is committed to its drive to

reduce net migration to sustainable levels.

Part of this is ensuring that the immigration system reduces overstaying, and making sure that only those who are able to make a strong contribution to the UK are able to extend their stay here.

As the PM has outlined, we need to root out abuse in our immigration system, and to this end we have already stopped more than 900 colleges from bringing both low-quality or sham students to the UK, who will not contribute to UK academic life and the research eco-system, demonstrating that student fraud will not be tolerated.

This will remain an important theme through the coming months. There is more that we need to do, and I am looking forward to seeing the results of the Home Office pilot, being taken forward with Oxford, Cambridge, Bath and Imperial. The pilot is testing how a streamlined process which simplifies visa applications and gives universities responsibility for eligibility checks could work.

Our approach to fake colleges isn't just about migration numbers. It is also about maintaining the reputation of our HE sector. Low-quality providers don't just damage the brand of this great sector. They also hold back social mobility and prevent young people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds who may be over-represented at them, from realising their potential and reaping all the benefits they hope to gain from a university experience.

The Prime Minister has already said she wants Britain to work for everyone. Both secretaries of state that I work with share this strong vision, as do I.

We want all those with the potential and the ability to succeed to do so. And the HE sector plays an essential role in this.

We have already removed the artificial cap on student numbers, giving thousands more students the opportunity to enter HE, with demonstrable results.

Data for entry in 2016 shows that the application rate for 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds has never been higher,

while UCAS data for the 2015 entry cycle shows a welcome increase in progression for the same group, including to the most selective institutions.

On top of this, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has agreed 183 access agreements for 2016 to 2017, with universities now planning to spend more than £745 million on measures to improve access and student success for these students.

HE's presence in DfE will help facilitate closer ties between universities and schools to tackle issues such as raising attainment, building on the priority that we gave this in the government's guidance to Les Ebdon, the Director of Fair Access, earlier this year – guidance which for the first time ensured that access agreements will target activity to those who have often been side-lined: white working-class boys and students with learning difficulties.

As I have said, UK universities rank among the very best in the world and our research base is of global envy. But to ensure that this high-quality education is accessible to all there is more to do. The Higher Education and Research Bill will make it easier for high-quality new providers to enter the sector, giving students more choices and opportunities, while the Teaching Excellence Framework, operated by the OfS, will ensure that institutions are rated and funded according to the quality of their teaching and outcomes from it, not just the number of students they teach.

I am also looking forward to seeing the report of UUK's Social Mobility Advisory Group, which Nicola is leading, and has been doing important work on this issue. Nobody is suggesting that universities alone can fix the underlying social divisions in our country so starkly exposed by the Brexit outcome. But universities can and must contribute, and, with the power that you do have, I make no apology for urging all of you to make this a priority.

Together, we must respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by Brexit and the changing nature of our economy and the way that change affects different groups of society.

The government cannot do this without your continued help and guidance.

We need your help to do more to drive up quality so that all students can be confident that their investment in a university education has been worthwhile. As Ed Peck, VC of this great university has put it: “Universities must become more student-centric and outcome driven, alongside fulfilling a wider role as catalysts for social mobility on an industrial scale.” I could not agree more.

I look forward to working with you in the months ahead.

Thank you.

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Department for Education

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