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Speech

Education Secretary sets ambition for international collaboration

Gavin Williamson addressed more than 100 education ministers from around the globe at the Education World Forum, setting out his vision for British education.

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From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP](#)

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's a real pleasure to be able to welcome so many fellow education ministers to London, for the 17th Education World Forum. And Dominic, thank you very much for your welcoming words. If I give you a little bit of guidance for the future, politicians don't like to be reminded of their own mortality. But with the information that education ministers last on average 20 months, I'm looking forward to a further 14 months in order to enjoy the job.

This year's event looks set to be, or is, bigger and better than previous events that have been held before – I think we have a record of around 120 countries in attendance, covering every inch of the globe, from Bermuda to Sierra Leone. I'm also delighted to be able to welcome so many new countries attending for the very first time — whether that is Bhutan, Mali and the Holy See.

Of course, none of us would be here without the people who make this event possible every year. So I'd like to start by thanking them. I know that a huge amount of work goes on behind the scenes making sure that this forum can happen — to bring us all together, so that we can share our experiences, learn from one another and try to build a bright future for people right across the world.

You've all landed in the United Kingdom at a historic time for us as a country. In just over a week from now, Britain will be leaving the European Union. Some people have taken that as a sign that we're stepping back from the world. I say quite the reverse. When this country wakes up on February 1st, it'll be waking up to an exciting new era. A new era where we believe Britain can play an important role, central on the global stage, forging new relationships across the world while reinvigorating longstanding friendships with some of our closest allies, both in Europe and outside of Europe.

And what better way to kick off a new era of international collaboration than in the field of education?

The theme of this year's forum revolves around a central question: "What does it take to transform education - to transform education in a generation?" All of the ministers in this room – myself included – have been urged to think longer term about how we deliver an education strategy for the next generation.

I personally like this theme a lot. Because 10 years ago, our government set out to do exactly that here in the United Kingdom.

Now, just to provide a little context, a British education has long been considered a first-class education. We have four universities in the global top 10, and we are the second most popular study destination for international students, behind only the United States of America. By some estimates, some 60 serving world leaders have benefited from a British education.

But though we have a lot to be proud of, back in 2010, many of our schools had gone into a state of decline.

The national curriculum had been stripped of knowledge. Soft skills were more in fashion; textbooks were out. We were stagnating in the international tables. But the most damning thing of all was that we were failing young pupils – particularly those from the poorest of backgrounds.

Faced with this difficult picture, the government embarked on huge reforms with the aim of setting first-class standards across every single subject. We introduced a more ambitious, knowledge-rich national curriculum in England, as well as more rigorous GCSEs, putting us in line with the highest-performing education systems in the world. We looked to what was working in other countries, how the highest-performing education systems in the world were doing so well, and – forgive us – we copied some of your ideas, but also very much coming up with our own. For example, we were one for the first G20 countries to introduce coding into the primary school curriculum.

These weren't easy changes to make and weren't, by any stretch, universally popular. But making them has been the right thing to do. Put simply, the alternative would have meant that as a country we were unable to offer people a world-class education for all, no matter who they are, whatever their background is, where they grew up.

Years later, speaking to you today, I'm glad to say that these reforms are bearing fruit.

For the first time, the latest PISA results show 15-year-olds in England achieving scores above the OECD national averages in reading, maths and science.

In maths, only 12 countries were significantly above us, compared to 19 in 2015 — progress that has been driven in particular by improvement of low attainers, making sure that every child in this country does well and has the opportunity to succeed.

Likewise, we achieved our highest ever score in reading for 9 to 10-year-olds in 2016, moving from 10th to 8th in the international rankings. This follows a greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum, and a particular focus on phonics.

We're making great progress. But there's no excuse to sit back, pat ourselves on the back and say this is a job that is done and is finished. Because it isn't. I want to make clear today that this government intends to drive further and harder; to push on with our reforms for as long as it takes so that we drive up standards in every single one of our schools, for all our children and young people wherever they happen to live.

We are in the middle of an education revolution in this country — one that began in 2010, and which won't stop until the UK is the best place to educate your child anywhere in the world.

So, how do we keep improving? As you all know, in today's ever-shrinking world, international collaboration is increasingly the key to success.

In fact, as I mentioned earlier, this government's own reform agenda involved a lot of what some would call stealing of ideas — but we always focus on the word borrowing. Some of the best ideas came from other countries.

Our maths programmes have been inspired by some brilliant maths teaching techniques from Shanghai and Singapore, who consistently dominate the international leaderboards in this area. Of course, that knowledge sharing has to work both ways. In turn, we've hosted a number of international delegations over the past 12 months for countries eager to learn from us about how we teach phonics.

As we enter a new decade, we intend to double down on that approach — searching for excellence wherever we can find it, sharing our best ideas when and where we can, and looking for new opportunities to collaborate internationally at every single turn.

Last March, we published the UK's International Education Strategy, setting out our ambition to increase international activity across all sectors of education — by increasing the value of our education exports and promoting the UK's reputation for excellence in education. But just as importantly, working with you, in partnership with you, so that you achieve more and we achieve more, together.

As I said earlier, Brexit represents a great opportunity to bring us closer together. Far from retreating from the world, our doors will remain open to talented individuals from all countries who wish to study in the UK's world-class universities.

International students already make up a huge contribution to the UK's higher education sector, and we've set an ambition to increase the number of students we host to 600,000 by 2030. To help achieve this, we have recently announced a new graduate route which will allow international students to remain in the UK for up to two years after successful completion of their studies.

We recognise for our higher education institutions to remain the best in the world, that is done through international collaboration, working with others, making sure that research and study is always an international endeavour.

Of course, a traditional academic education isn't the be all and end all,

and we're all rapidly finding this out. It's 2020, and we all live in a modern global economy—one that is set to be transformed by AI, automation and other technologies, and which will require a new and constantly changing skillset for our workforce. And those might not be the kind of skills that we can necessarily always develop within universities or traditional academia.

As a result, every country across the world is now putting a much bigger focus on further and technical education, so that we can build a workforce that's fighting fit for the future and able to deal with the new challenges and opportunities that the globe faces.

In fact, whenever I travel abroad and have discussions with other government ministers, one of the most common things I'm asked about is our apprenticeship programme, which forms a key part of a mission that we have in this government to have the skills that we need in order to seize the opportunities of the next generation.

One of the defining questions of the 2020s will be how to tackle these challenges, and I know that in coming years we'll all keen to share our expertise and ideas in this area.

Another booming industry, one that I know that all of you are keeping your eyes on, is EdTech. I'm sure many of you here today will be attending the international Bett technology show, which my colleague Chris Skidmore will be opening at the ExCel centre on Wednesday.

Bett is an amazing showcase of all the latest educational tools and software, and I'm proud to say that the United Kingdom has long punched above its weight in this area. Investments in the United Kingdom technology industry over the last four years place us 4th globally.

Our work in attracting worldwide interest is evident to see. There's our EdTech Testbed programme, for example, which we've developed with innovation foundation Nesta. The testbeds will see schools and colleges matched with digital technology that has the potential to save hours of teachers' time on assessment, timetabling and parental contributions. We only launched that programme in October, and already, we've had questions from groups as far and wide as Sweden, Italy, Qatar and others.

It's yet another area where Britain is leading the way, and bringing educators across the globe together to share what we've learnt and work together on new ideas and their implementation.

Amidst all the tech and gadgets, though, there is another, far more "old-school" way of developing bonds through education. One that I'm proud to support, and that's the humble school exchange programme. For decades now, children across the world have been making overseas

trips to meet their fellow pupils from partner schools, often staying in their students' family homes and as they do so and making lifelong friendships along the way and having a much deeper understanding of what that country is about from anything they could ever learn in a textbook.

Last year we set up a £2.5 million programme to help encourage international exchanges, with a particular focus on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thanks to that programme, children from 138 schools have or are planning to travel to countries as far-ranging such as Austria and Zambia.

Today, I'm thrilled to announce a one-year extension to this International School Exchange programme, and its expansion to include primary school children in Years 5 and 6.

I can't overestimate how positive this initiative is: it doesn't just allow children from all of our countries to experience one another's cultures and languages. It allows the poorest pupils in England to experience opportunities they would never have been able to experience. One 14-year-old from Derbyshire, visited Toulon in France. And he said – and I'm quoting here – that it was “the best experience of his life”.

Having a lasting impact on so many children, inspiring them to learn, inspiring them to do so much more. That is what exchanges can do.

That's the kind of international collaboration I know we all want to see, and it's great that a whole new group of school children will be able to set off on their own exciting adventures in 2020.

Programmes like that get to the heart of why we're all here, serving as education ministers. It's because we believe in giving people the right to a good education, no matter where they're from. But the right to a good education should be a universal right — not just a luxury for those living in the world's richest or most developed countries.

That's why I'd like to devote my final comments to a subject I know that is very close to our prime minister's heart, which is education for girls across the world.

The United Kingdom is leading global action in this area, so that we can help provide 12 years' of quality education for all girls by 2030. The Prime Minister has spoken repeatedly and with great passion about this pledge, to leave no girl anywhere behind.

It's an effort boosted by multilateral, international and non-government organisations, and is probably the best example of the good we can all do when we work together, to tackle the barriers that hold the world's most vulnerable back.

Education is central to removing those barriers. It's the great leveller: no matter who you are or where you're from, if you have an education, you have hope.

We then, as education ministers, carry a huge burden of responsibility on our shoulders, to do everything we can to equip people with all the knowledge and tools that they need in order to be able to succeed in life. And that's why it's so important that we work together over the coming days, months and years to share our experiences and insight.

We truly do hold the tools to make a global difference and a global change. So many people turn to us to provide them with a chance to succeed in life. To free themselves sometimes from the poverty they've known, or the lack of ambition that others have experienced. We have that ability to level up, to give people, young people, the chance for them to succeed, for our nations to succeed, and for every generation to be able to contribute more to their nations but also to the globe. That is what we can, and that is what we will do.

Thank you.

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