

Part of **Education and childcare during coronavirus**

# Speech

## Universities Minister calls for true social mobility

Speaking to the NEON summit on widening access and mobility, Universities Minister Michelle Donelan, outlines a new approach to social mobility.

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From: [Department for Education](#) and [Michelle Donelan MP](#)

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Thank you, Graeme, and good morning everyone. I am so pleased to be able to join you today for this virtual event and to see so many of you attending.

So we all know the current situation presents new challenges for us all, including prospective students.

This is particularly true for those in disadvantaged groups who may not be able to rely on their schools, colleges or teachers for information, advice and guidance that is so crucial in this time of their lives.

And providers have new challenges to be able to reach and connect with young people – such as the challenge of how to make a university tour engaging and meaningful when it is online.

I've been impressed by the innovation some providers have shown and it is now more important than ever to share ideas and good practice.

Initiatives such as UpReach show what can be done.

They've recently launched a new range of Assessed Virtual Internships that have delivered opportunities for over 1000 disadvantaged students. They provide training in areas from communication skills to coding, with top performers recommended for graduate positions at leading firms such as Deloitte and McKinsey.

It shows what really can be done with technology.

We always need to remember why we are doing this – we are doing this to level the playing field by creating opportunities for those who for too long haven't had those chances.

I do believe it is down to all of us to open up opportunities so that every person can rise to the position that their talents and hard work allows.

But today I want to send a strong message – that social mobility isn't about getting more people into university.

For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals.

True social mobility is about getting people to choose the path that will lead to their desired destination and enabling them to complete that path.

True social mobility is when we put students and their needs and career ambitions first, be that in HE, FE or apprenticeships.

Whatever path taken, I want it to lead to skilled, meaningful jobs, that fulfil their ambitions and improve their life earnings, whether that's as a teacher, an electrician, a lawyer, a plumber, a nurse or in business.

But don't get me wrong - higher education should be open to all, all those who are qualified by ability and attainment.

And universities do need to do much, much more to ensure that all students - and particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds - are recruited on to courses that will deliver good outcomes and that they have the confidence to apply and the information they need to make informed choices.

That's why, I really welcome the launch of UCAS' Clearing+ this year, so that those applicants in clearing will be sent a personalised set of options and courses they could take with the grades they have achieved.

This is especially needed given the pandemic has led to less face time with teachers and advisors and will particularly benefit those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who, like me, are the first in their family to go to university.

It will make it easier for every applicant with the right grades to obtain the right place for them so that every young person can truly achieve their potential.

In order to tackle the gaps in achievement and higher education progression between groups of learners, and ensure they don't widen because of the impact of COVID-19, new, innovative forms of collaboration at the national level will be essential.

Uni4me, led by NEON, is a prime example of this kind of collaboration.

Uni4me is a new, online hub bringing together over 50 HE providers and uni-connect consortia to offer support including virtual online and blended learning courses, online tuition and support in core GCSE and A Level subjects and plus Live events involving leading academics, students and specialist HE advisors.

So I am delighted that today I have been asked to officially 'launch' uni4me which goes live today. I am sure that it will make a significant contribution.

Now, turning back, to the wider point of social mobility and higher education in general – I do believe that we need to think again.

The 2004 access regime has let down too many young people. Since 2004, there has been too much focus on getting students through the door, and not enough focus on how many drop out, or how many go on to graduate jobs.

Too many have been misled by the expansion of popular sounding courses with no real demand from the labour market.

Quite frankly, our young people have been taken advantage of – particularly those without a family history of going to university. Instead some have been left with the debt of an investment that didn't pay off in any sense.

And too many universities have felt pressured to dumb down – either when admitting students, or in the standards of their courses. We have seen this with grade inflation and it has to stop.

We need to end the system of arbitrary targets that are not focused on the individual student's needs and goals. And let's be clear – we help disadvantaged students by driving up standards, not by levelling down.

In the school system we're fortunate enough to have visionary leaders such as Rachel de Souza, and they reject low expectations. What they and their schools have achieved for some of the most disadvantaged children in the UK is outstanding, delivering phenomenal results and getting them into some of the best universities in the country, into courses that are right for them.

They are uncompromising on standards and expect the best from every child.

But the onus must also be on universities to go further too, not just admitting disadvantaged students with good grades, but focusing even more on helping them to achieve and complete courses. And going the extra mile to raise standards and aspirations in schools.

One of the most successful initiatives in this area has been specialist maths schools – which are sponsored by and attached to universities. They provide high quality, inspirational teaching, and help ease the transition between A level and university maths.

In fact, in 2019 King's Maths School was top in the country for A Level attainment, and that includes independent schools. 100% of students achieved an A or A\* in A Level Maths and our commitment is to have a 16-19 maths school in every single region. And so I am delighted that so many universities are already on board with this programme.

Alongside the maths schools established by King's College London and the University of Exeter, Cambridge, Durham, Lancaster, and Surrey universities all have schools in development, and the University of Liverpool Maths School will open this September. There is much to learn from the high quality and long-term involvement that universities have had with these maths schools, and of course, it's not just maths.

Whether its science, languages, engineering or the humanities, universities should be doing all they can to raise attainment for the less fortunate and work with schools.

That can be sponsoring schools, supporting a robust curriculum or running summer camps, universities have the potential here to make a tremendous difference in opening up opportunities.

So, I want your access budgets not to be spent on marketing but on raising standards, providing the role models, the information, encouraging aspiration and highlighting the high quality opportunities available.

To conclude this Government was elected on a mandate to level up Britain, to deliver greater opportunities to every person and every community in the UK.

Universities must play a vital role in helping to achieve this mission and helping to achieve the transformation of lives.

So, today I'm calling for change, to start a new era on access and mobility, on putting prospective students and their ambitions and their needs first; on results and impact, not on box ticking and marketing; and on delivering graduates into jobs that really will transform their lives.

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