

Speech

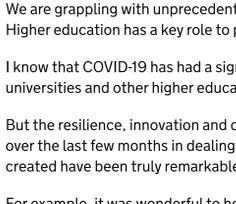
Education Secretary sets out aims for higher education

Speaking to Universities UK members Gavin Williamson told vice-chancellors about his aims for achieving excellence in higher education.

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

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today at the UUK conference.

I want to start by giving my sincere thanks and praise to the Higher Education sector for the way in which it has responded to the challenges of the past few months. I will then go on to talk about the role of the sector in supporting economic growth, nationally but also regionally.

We are grappling with unprecedented economic challenges and Higher education has a key role to play in helping us overcome these.

I know that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on students, universities and other higher education providers.

But the resilience, innovation and dedication from staff and students over the last few months in dealing with the issues the pandemic has created have been truly remarkable.

For example, it was wonderful to hear that despite the national lockdown, Natural Science students at Bangor University still managed to go on a virtual fieldtrip around Anglesey, using social media platforms to follow an actual tour undertaken by a senior lecturer prior to the lockdown.

And students at Warwick University, like many across the country, have been writing blogs to provide tips and support on subjects such as mental health during the COVID outbreak. Students have also been instrumental for many universities in helping and co-producing re-opening plans and communications.

And let's not forget scientists, researchers and technicians in universities across the UK who are supporting our Vaccines Taskforce by working tirelessly to research a vaccine for coronavirus. It is thanks to their valuable medical and research expertise that vaccine candidate clinical trials are now taking place at the University of Oxford and Imperial College London.

Universities have also offered vital services such as lab space and accommodation, applying research expertise to develop medicine and equipment needed to combat the virus.

Many have also repurposed their facilities to carry out testing on those with coronavirus symptoms and have collaborated with industry partners on producing ventilators, PPE and testing equipment.

This is truly remarkable, and what makes our university sector truly world class.

With 4 higher education providers in the world's top 10 and 18 in the top 100, I am so proud that the UK's higher education sector has such a well-established reputation for high quality and world class research and innovation.

Just as importantly, UK universities are renowned for choice and flexibility and I am delighted that thousands of international students choose to study here each year, contributing to the UK both culturally, socially and economically.

Working closely with Universities UK, the British Council and others, Minister Donelan has been spearheading communications, reassuring current and prospective international students that the UK higher education is 'open for business', remains world-class and is a safe, welcoming and tolerant place to study.

As part of this, Government has also committed to an additional £1m in marketing spend delivered through Study UK.

I want to say again here today that for those seeking an excellent education and an unforgettable UK student experience, we are ensuring existing rules and processes are as flexible as possible and better than ever.

Not only have we confirmed that distance learning will be permitted for the 2020/21 academic year to respond to the circumstances we find ourselves in with COVID.

But, in addition, this time last year I spoke to you about the new 2 year post study offer in the form of the Graduate Route, and since then we have improved it further through announcing to offer 3 years for those on PhDs.

I hope you agree that we now have a world-class student visa offer befitting our world-class higher education sector – this will only improve once the Student route is launched later this year, and student visa processes are further streamlined.

In June I was happy to appoint one of your own, Sir Steve Smith, as the UK's new International Education Champion, who has already begun assisting with opening up export growth opportunities for the whole UK education sector.

And we intend to publish review of the International Education Strategy this Autumn in order to ensure we retain laser-like focus on increasing the number of international students we host to 600k by 2030.

For those planning to study in the UK from the Autumn, I know that our higher education providers are consistently doing their utmost to ensure international students are supported and feel welcome on university campuses.

For all this good work and world class prestige, I do acknowledge that the pressures providers are facing as a result of COVID-19 are substantial and some may face serious financial difficulties as a result.

That is why my department is working closely with the sector, the Office for Students and across Government to monitor and fully understand the financial risks that providers are facing and help them access support where necessary, and have established a restructuring regime to support universities as a last resort, if it proves necessary.

I fully recognise that the decision on exam results a few weeks ago has not only impacted students and their families, but also universities and the admissions system. As I said at the time, we took this decision in the best interest of the students.

I have been incredibly impressed with the sector's response and I know that it is striving to be to be fair and flexible in its approach to admissions.

Despite the uncertainty over what the coming year will look like on the ground, demand for higher education places has been great this year and universities have taken fantastic steps to reassure incoming students.

Government have removed the caps on medicine and dentistry courses this year and we are providing additional Teaching Grant and capital funding to support increased capacity.

Beyond this, the sector has excelled in adapting to take on as many students as possible, whilst of course taking responsibility and ensuring COVID-19 measures and precautions are adhered to.

I want to take this opportunity to land three key messages with you. The first is to keep going.

I've acknowledged some of the great work already done by the sector - but this will need to continue as we work through this uncertain period of time together.

To support with and solidify this progress already made, we have recently published new guidance for Higher Education providers on reopening campuses and buildings in a COVID-secure way.

We have used the evidence and recommendations set out in the HE SAGE report, as the corner stone of this guidance, in addition to input and advice from the sector. We expect this guidance to feed in directly to the plans HE providers are putting in place to reopen their doors safely, and I look forward to working with all stakeholders as the situation evolves across the autumn term.

And this brings me on to the second key message which I want to convey, the importance of collaboration. Specifically, providers working with their local authorities to develop plans for local outbreaks.

My department has worked with the Joint Biosecurity Centre, other government departments and local communities to establish best practice for providers to implement an integrated approach for tightening measures in areas subject to local restrictions.

I encourage universities to refer to this guidance on engaging with their local authority.

And finally, the key message of the government to the public is clear - we all must stay alert in order to control the virus and save lives and as part of this, students need to act responsibly on and off campus.

This is why working with the sector to develop a communications campaign and strategies has been pivotal to ensuring students have the information they need to make responsible choices, to keep themselves and those around them safe and their environments COVID-secure. We are asking you to also deliver clear messages to students about the measures you have in place, and how important it is that they follow them – to protect their own health, and the wider community.

We know that students travel from across the country and indeed across the world to attend our world-class universities. So we are also asking you to support and encourage students to stay at university if restrictions are imposed locally which limit their ability to enjoy face to face teaching – as you did when restrictions were first in place in March – to help manage the risk of students transmitting the virus back home.

This pandemic has resulted in a myriad of unprecedented challenges for the Higher Education sector to contend with.

However, knowing that the sector can rise to these and with such creativity, giving me faith and conviction that our institutions will continue to hold their place and represent the UK on the world stage.

It is this innovation, strength and adaptability which will ensure the sector can play a central role in economic growth.

Universities and other higher education providers play a key role in the national economy as well as in regional and local economies, not only by providing students with the skills they need to go into graduate jobs, but also by being at the forefront of applied industrial research and by working closely with hundreds of businesses.

They are a crucial part of the post-16 education landscape, that includes further education and apprenticeships, all of which give young people a real opportunity to enhance their career pathways and options after they leave school.

So today, I want to talk about the role all higher education providers play in delivering this essential mission.

Too often, there can be an implicit narrative that every university needs to measure itself against Oxbridge. That if a university isn't winning Nobel prizes and taking in triple A students it is somehow second rate.

In reality, it is the diversity of our sector which will drive the levelling up agenda that is central to everything this Government does.

Take my own university, Bradford, which can trace its foundation back to the town's Mechanics Institute in 1832. Or the University of Birmingham, founded by Joseph Chamberlain to underpin the growing industrial and economic strength of Britain's second city.

These regional missions are as important today as they were then – and will only increase in importance as the nation recovers from the impact of COVID-19. Jobs, industry and regional growth must be at the heart of our education strategy – and universities must be a key part of that.

And there have been some fantastic examples to date. I was speaking to a businessman in my constituency recently, a locksmith who spoke glowingly of the support he had received from the University of Wolverhampton. The University of Wolverhampton is rated as one of the best universities in Europe for product design. And at London South Bank University, approximately 80% of students, as advisors to local businesses, helping their community whilst simultaneously gaining vital employability skills.

These are excellent examples of successful integration with local business. However, we must acknowledge that we are not quite there yet in achieving our goals.

There are still pockets of low quality. One only has to look at the Guardian subject league tables to see there are too many courses where well under 50% of students proceed to graduate employment.

But more fundamentally, in order to create a fairer, more prosperous and more productive country, we need to reverse the generational decline in higher technical education.

We have already announced that, over the next few years, we will be establishing a system of higher technical education where learners and employers can have confidence in high-quality courses that provide the skills they need to succeed in the workplace, whether they are taught in a further education college, a university or an independent training provider.

Of course, a large proportion of this will be delivered in our great further education colleges, but what I also want to see is for universities to end their preoccupation with three-year bachelors' degrees and offer far more higher technical qualifications and apprenticeships. These would be more occupation focused and provide a better targeted route for some students, and benefit employers and the economy.

Universities and other higher education providers are already an important part of this market, but I want to see their technical offer expand.

Only 10% of all adults aged 18-65 hold a higher technical qualification as their highest qualification, compared to around 20% of adults in Germany and as much as 34% in Canada.

And, as a nation, we must be honest that have gone backwards here. Well over 100,000 people were doing Higher National Certificates and Diplomas in the year 2000; that has reduced to fewer than 35,000. And within Higher Education Institutes, total participants in foundation degrees have declined from a high of 81,000 (in 2009/10), to approximately 30,000 (28,760 in 2018/19).

Yet the economic case for studying these qualifications is inarguable. I want to capitalise on the potential of further and higher education providers to deliver excellent higher technical education and apprenticeships.

My vision is for a system which learners and employers have true confidence in for providing the skills they need to succeed.

As I set out in my Further Education speech on 9th July 2020, we will not see growth in the economy if universities do not play their part. And of course, they will play their part, as they have always done. I believe the join up with Further Education through increased flexibility so that study fits with the needs of students with busy lives, is key in ensuring these two sectors work cohesively together.

While good work has already been done, I am motivated to see us go further to achieving excellence. But, knowing that our providers and institutions are fantastically placed to deliver on these aims, gives me full confidence in our collective ability.

And I want to say here today, to each and every institution, you are part of the solution.

I hope each of you recognise your value and will work with me to achieve these ambitions.

Thank you.

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