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Speech

Education Secretary speech at Universities UK Annual Conference

Gavin Williamson spoke about access targets at universities with poor student outcomes as well as driving up standards in higher education.

From: Department for Education and The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Published 9 September 2021

Delivered on: **9 September 2021 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)**

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Steve, thank you ever so much for that introduction can just start off by saying an enormous thank you to Julia, who over the last two years we worked so closely with and I can assure you that your past chairman was always incredibly firm and yet tenacious, but always incredibly polite in terms of the way she fought for the sector and put the interest of the sector at the heart of government. I'm really looking forward, Steve, to working closely with you and I know you will take that same approach, recognising that working together we can achieve so much more

I am delighted to be joining you today.

When we gathered this time last year, we were very much in the grip of the pandemic, vaccines were still in development, and none of us could clearly see when we would be able to return to some form of normality.

Back then I began by thanking you for the incredible leadership and resourcefulness you had shown throughout the pandemic.

It is no less true today than it was then, and I am no less grateful for everything you have done, and that includes the universities throughout the United Kingdom, not just England, to keep your students learning throughout the past 18 months at incredibly difficult times.

Now we start a new academic year with the hope that we have the worst of the disruption behind us.

I would like to thank you especially for the preparations you have put in place to welcome a record number of new students in a few weeks' time.

More than 230,000 18-year-olds in England have had their university places confirmed. What's more, the number of applications that were made by young people from a disadvantaged background were up 9% on last year. This will have a major impact on our ambition to level up the country. It also reflects the hard work by students in exceptional circumstances.

Still, I know this year's bumper influx, however welcome, has been testing your administration systems to the full.

But equally I know that you are just as determined as I am that we cannot put young lives on hold, especially when so many have already paid a very high price for Covid.

This is why I have been working so hard… and I know from conversations I've had with many of you here today, that you've been working equally hard… to make sure that all our young people can still look forward to seeing all their hopes for the future start to become a reality.

And I am, of course, delighted that there are currently two important Bills for the higher education sector in Parliament, on Skills and on Free Speech, which we will be continuing to take forward over the coming months. One other key policy reform is post-qualification admissions, which will help us to address a long-standing unfairness in our university admissions system.

We need a simpler and fairer admissions system, because we know the current one can work against the interests of some students, especially high achieving disadvantaged students, and drives unwelcome behaviours such as unconditional offers.

The last two years have emphasised the importance of delivering on our plans for PQA – not only to stabilise the system but to empower students to have the very best opportunities to succeed.

That is why I am determined to accelerate our plans to bring forward this important reform. We've been engaging the devolved administrations closely on our plans, and I was pleased to see that they endorsed our consultation. We will continue to work with them as we move forward, and I'm also keen to continue working with Universities UK, exam boards and school leaders on this policy.

By working together, we can make this important change, the main beneficiary of who, will be students. Alongside this, I'm pleased to say that we will shortly be appointing a new Director of Fair Access and Participation to the Office for Students. I'd like to see our access regime re-centred on the principles of equality of opportunity and high standards, and to see higher education providers working in partnership with schools to drive up attainment.

We need to recognise that just sending kids with low academic achievement into universities isn't going to magically change them into highly mobile graduates – indeed, it's more likely to lead them to failure and poor outcomes.

And that there is no substitute for the hard grind of driving up standards.

Since I took on the job of Education Secretary, I've been on a mission to bring in greater fairness and wider choice in the post-16 landscape and I am very glad to say that we have made huge progress over the last two years.

We are entering a new era, one of greater choice and increased opportunities. This is critical not only to level up opportunity across society, it'll be critical as we recover from the pandemic and start to build back better.

Although 50% of young people now go to university that still leaves 50% who do not.

Thanks to our reforms, those 50% now have more options than they ever did before, options that can lead to a well-paid job and satisfying career.

Five years after completion, the average Higher Apprentice earns more than the average graduate. T Levels, apprenticeships, Institutes of Technology are all expanding throughout the country. They are being developed hand in glove with employers and will be geared to developing the skills the country needs as we build our recovery.

Universities are fundamental to this mission. Take Northumbria University, where you are today, it's one of the leading universities in Europe for product design. How do we enhance that, how to we grow it how do we make sure that where universities are strong? We invest, we push them forward, and able to lead the world, but also drive this country forward

I believe more universities should be more willing to carve out expertise in more technical fields, excelling on a different set of axes to those used by the traditional league tables. Too often, this can be interpreted as meaning 'everyone must have prizes', or that all universities and courses are equal.

This is not what I mean: Professor David Phoenix's Social Mobility Index demonstrates that some universities, such as my old university of Bradford, Aston and Imperial College and others, perform particularly strongly at transforming students from disadvantaged backgrounds into highly employable graduates.

A real-world focus is not about lowering aspirations, but achieving excellence through a focus on STEM, applied research, close links with employers and a ruthless focus on employability.

The Prime Minister's ground-breaking Lifelong Loan Entitlement will help enable this. It is going to change the way we prepare people for adult life, and especially their working lives. It will address the need to future-proof training and skills so that everyone can study and train in ways that suit them.

The loan entitlement will make it easier for students to access courses and to study in a modular way, or to commit to blocks of study as they do now at higher technical and degree levels, regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or provided in universities. They can fit learning around work, or their family or whatever personal circumstances they may have. It is, in a sense, a season ticket to further and higher education that will last for many academic years.

We've recently invited universities and further education colleges to bid for a share of £2 million in funding to create new short courses across five important subject areas which are STEM, healthcare, digital innovation, education, and supporting Net Zero.

Earlier this year we launched a new £18 million fund to help providers of Higher Technical Qualifications invest in equipment and training to meet the growing demand for skills at this level across a number of sectors including digital, construction, health and science.

We're also going to be consulting on the detail and scope of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement this year, and in the meantime, we will continue to work closely with you and your colleagues in the college sector.

Whether they opt for modules, a higher technical qualification, or a three-year degree, I think all of us would agree that every student is entitled to expect a high-quality, rich learning experience.

As they plan their futures, they will be asking themselves how best they can get it… is the course the right for them? Is the course the thing that will be a good investment for them and their future?

Above all students want the university experience to be the one they worked so hard for before Covid came along. We've all missed over the last few years, and students, I think they've missed the life on campus the creative buzz they get, the thrill of discovering new friends, new ideas, new ways of seeing the world.

But perhaps what they are craving most of all at the moment is a return to normality and they'll be making a beeline for the institutions that are quickest off the mark in delivering this.

We know from this year's Student Academic Experience Survey, that many of them haven't been getting it.

This has obviously been coloured by the restrictions that we had to impose because of Covid but the students who responded to this survey have still sent a very clear message.

The survey shows that in-person teaching is now one of the top three areas singled out for improvement by students.

This is something we cannot ignore. While the switch to online teaching was a necessary and vital way of keeping young people learning in as safe a way as possible, we have now moved on and students quite rightly expect that they can study in person alongside other students.

Imagine trying to make sense of the subtleties of interpreting Chekov for the stage or carrying out complex molecular biology techniques over Zoom. I for one would need the full benefit of that in-person, world-class teaching that you and your members can rightly be so proud of.

Obviously, I am not saying that you relax all those health measures which are there to keep people as safe as possible and minimise the risk of COVID transmission.

What I do want to make clear is that I do not expect to see online learning used as a cost-cutting measure. If there's a genuine benefit to using technology, then it should be done – and Sir Michael Barber's Digital Teaching and Learning Review sets out some of the opportunities. But that is not an excuse to not also deliver high quality face-to-face teaching.

And let's face it, in this new era of choice students don't have to settle for poor value.

I should at this point congratulate all of those universities, so many of them that have quickly and swiftly pivoted back from pandemic response to resume face-to-face teaching. And I know the overwhelming majority of you have done that.

This is not just expedient or sensible, it will help maintain the United Kingdom's reputation for exceptionally high quality.

How else can we guarantee that students get the best possible experience from their studies, one that prepares them for adult life and which also represents good value for money?

In one word, it is quality.

Quality is what sets our universities apart from the rest of world's.

Quality is what will deliver a meaningful qualification that offers the right skills and preparation for a working life. And quality is what will justify the huge investment that students are making to study.

But quality covers more than teaching. Quality extends to the value of the degree. You represent the best of the best but to keep that reputation for excellence, you must be vigilant in showing that the degrees awarded to students are a reliable indicator of academic achievement.

Students and employers need to know that a degree means something. And not all degrees are created equal.

There have been too many instances where pockets of low quality have undermined the teaching or value for money that students and taxpayers rightly expect.

Lowering the bar for certain groups of students serves no one. It is patronising to expect less from some students under the guise of supporting them. Effective academic writing requires good spelling, punctuation and grammar from every student.

It is so disappointing to see some in the field of higher education cling to the myth that the quality of a course or degree makes no difference to a student's outcomes.

While it may be comforting for some institutions, what it is actually saying is that they don't believe in education.

It is also easily disproved.

Take Aston University, for example, where over 40% of entrants come from the most deprived neighbourhoods – nearly twice the average in England and yet it achieves a 96% continuation rate – streets ahead of other comparable institutions and on a par with many of the Russell Group.

There are many other universities, both old and new, that are similarly doing great work.

But at the same time, at 25 higher education institutions, fewer than half the students who begin a degree will go on to graduate employment or further study.

As I have said before, this is simply unacceptable.This represents a shocking waste of potential as well as a heart-breaking failure in someone's hopes and dreams.

The Office for Students have a key role to play in raising quality and standards. They will take action where quality is low. And I am clear that, in the future, students recruited on to such courses should not be able to be counted against a university's access targets for access.

To address some other important matters, I'd first like to thank the many universities who have already signed up to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. I am very pleased that over 80 universities have signed up already, up from about 30 a year ago.

And for those who have not yet done so, I'd ask you to reconsider and to do so quickly. The dreadful spike in antisemitic incidents on campus earlier this year demonstrates just how important this is – and it goes without saying that there is simply no excuse for antisemitism or any other forms of racism anywhere but least of all in a university.

More broadly, although our universities are, in the main, fantastic communities, we would all admit that, like anywhere in society, they are not perfect. Whether it is the antisemitic incidents I've just mentioned, the use of non-disclosure agreements to silence victims of sexual assault, or increasingly casualised workforce or inadequate teaching provision for disabled students, there are genuine injustices which we should strive to put right.

I would at this point like to thank UUK for their incredibly helpful guidance in this area. Supporting the sector to learn from the best and constantly raise the bar.

Improving these matters would command strong support from all walks of life. Yet too often, some universities seem more interested in pursuing a divisive agenda involving cancelling national heroes, debating about statues, anonymous reporting schemes for so-called micro-aggressions and politicising their curricula. Vice-chancellors who allow these initiatives to take place in their name must understand that they do nothing but undermine public confidence, widen divisions, and damage the sector.

I call on you to help bring our nation together, instead of driving our nation apart. Rather than manufacturing offences from the past, let us instead come together to tackle injustice and promote equality for the students and staff on today.

One area that I believe universities can make real and measurable improvements, is to get rid of the ball and chain of bureaucracy. Some of you may have heard me talk of this before, but I still believe we have some way further to go.

The Augar review concluded that the amount spent on teaching seemed low, while around £1,000 was spent per student on corporate activities and around £500 per student on marketing.

I remained concerned that the sector isn't doing enough to shift more of its income towards direct activity that improves learning outcomes or vital services like mental health support, and less on its own administration.

As recipients of tens of billions of pounds of public money, universities have a duty to be careful stewards of taxpayers' money. Our world reputation is built on the confidence we have in our academics, in their passion, their drive and their commitment to the pursuit of knowledge. We need to free them to do what they do best.

And I do recognise that we in Government must also play our part. My department is working closely with the Office for Students on our shared agenda to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, and to ensure the higher education regulatory system is clearer, more effective and more accountable and crucially less bureaucratic.

I know that since the OfS's announcement on reducing bureaucracy on last September, the sector has particularly welcomed its more streamlined communications and guidance, and the greater clarity on timelines for upcoming announcements, and of course the increased engagement.

But clearly there is so much more we need to do on the side of Government, so while I'm asking you to do more, I also recognise that we need to do more to support you.

I have spent a lot of time today talking about quality. I know that in many respects I am preaching to the choir… You all know what good looks like. But we can never ease up on trying to make good, better, and better excellent.

I began by saying that we are entering a new era of opportunity and choice. It is such an exciting prospect not just for students today who are even now preparing to make their way to your doors, some for the very first time, but for those who are still at school and dreaming of what their lives might look like.

I am enormously proud that we are working together to guarantee that those dreams of so many young people are going be realised, and that working together we are truly, truly going to unleash their full potential.

Thank you.

Published 9 September 2021

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