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Speech

Universities Minister sets out progress on access and participation

Chris Skidmore spoke about opening up access to university and ensuring successful participation at Birkbeck, University of London.

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Thank you for inviting me to give a speech this morning at Birkbeck, University of London. I'm delighted to have just had the chance to tour

the university and to visit the Birkbeck Babylab. When I visit universities, I usually get the pleasure of meeting staff and students, so it was certainly a first for me today to be greeted by a room full of babies!

Since Birkbeck is a unique institution in our higher education sector, it makes sense I use this platform this morning to talk about access and participation.

Birkbeck has always been one step ahead when it comes to opening up access to university, with the first female students admitted to Birkbeck in 1830 – a good 40 years before either Oxford or Cambridge opened their doors to women.

But this commitment to widening access hasn't been easy. When George Birkbeck set up the University as an early pioneer of adult education, I hear he was accused of "scattering the seeds of evil".

Thankfully, we have come a long way since then. And I am delighted that next year will be a milestone year for Birkbeck – marking the 100th anniversary of its accession to the University of London.

Birkbeck now plays a vital role in offering people a different kind of higher education – namely through part-time, flexible study, taught in term-time on weekday evenings.

And it is thanks to institutions like Birkbeck and, of course, the Open University – which is celebrating its own milestone anniversary this year – that people are able to access higher education later in life and fit it around their existing commitments.

I am keen that we learn from this flexible, 'step-on, step-off' approach to higher education for the future. And I'm here today to see for myself how we can continue to bring down barriers to access, and enable more people to reap the benefits of our world-class universities and colleges.

Now, I know it's an odd time of the year to be visiting universities – after most undergraduate students have gone home for the summer and there's only a few dedicated postgrads and staff members left on campus. But, when I became Universities Minister at the end of last year, I made a pledge to visit as many institutions as I could. And there's no reason why that should stop now – particularly since I don't know if I'll still be Universities Minister in a few weeks' time!

And I'm not the only one awaiting my fate. Next month, thousands of young people across the country will find out how they did in their A-Levels or equivalent. And for those who have applied to go on to higher education through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), this will be the moment they find out which institution they are going to.

For some, this will be their first or second choice on their UCAS application forms. But for others, their final destination may indeed be somewhere they haven't even considered yet. But they will be helped to find it by dedicated support teams as part of the annual Clearing and Adjustment process.

If I'm fortunate enough to still be in post on 15th August, I look forward to joining teams at the UCAS headquarters on A-Level results day to see for myself just some of the hard work that goes into finding applicants a higher education course that suits them. And I look forward to speaking to applicants themselves as they assess their options and plan their future direction.

This is all about students making choices, which are best for them. And that's why we're expanding the range of options available to students today.

For one, we are putting extra resources into higher technical education and apprenticeships. So, as well as offering a range of world-leading higher education courses, we'd like to ensure that vocational and technical training options of equal quality are available across the entire country, so that all 18-year-olds are able to select the pathway that best suits their aspirations and potential.

But of course, as you at Birkbeck know better than anyone, higher level education is not just for 18-year-olds. Here, at Birkbeck, we see the ultimate in flexible teaching models combined with high impact research, which all goes to show that part-time and mature students are right to expect the highest quality experience and outcomes.

This government recognises the importance of studying part-time and later in life, and the huge range of benefits it can bring to individuals, employers and the wider economy. We acknowledge there has been a 57% decline in the number of students in part-time higher education since 2010-11 – many of whom will be mature. And we recognise the need to rectify this since, as the world of work changes, it is important people are able to retrain and reskill as they need, so they don't get left behind.

According to research by the Centre for Social Justice, it is expected that anywhere between 10 and 35% of the UK workforce will need to reskill in the next 20 years. And this reskilling does not just lead to better and more secure jobs, but also higher pay – since the mean hourly wage for an individual qualified to Level 4 and above was 60% higher in 2014 than for those who stopped at Level 2 qualifications.

That's why we have made a number of changes to support part-time and mature learners. This academic year, part-time students are – for the first time ever – able to access full-time equivalent maintenance loans.

Plus, we have removed the “equivalent or lower qualification” restrictions – the so-called ELQ restrictions – for all part-time science, technology, engineering and mathematics degree courses. This means, students enrolled on these courses, who already hold a degree, can now access support through student loans.

But we know we still need to do more – both to encourage students to study part-time and later in life, and to encourage all higher education providers to develop their offers to appeal to those students. The Office for Students (OfS) has a duty to consider the promotion of choice and opportunity in the provision of higher education in England, including through part-time and lifelong learning. And I am particularly interested in seeing what the OfS can do – through its work with providers on Access and Participation Plans – to encourage them to consider barriers and problems faced by mature learners, and how they can be overcome.

If applications data for the upcoming academic year (2019/20) is anything to go by, we are making good progress on our ambition to open up higher education to anyone who has the potential to benefit from it and succeed. Data released by UCAS just last week shows a record rate of applications from English 18-year-olds – 39.5% of whom applied for higher education this year ahead of the June deadline.

What’s more, during the course of this government, we have rightly come to celebrate the record number of 18-year-old applicants to higher education from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

In 2018, for the first time ever, over 20% of English 18-year-olds living in the lowest participation neighbourhoods entered higher education. That’s testament to the great efforts made by many universities to attract disadvantaged students.

And the data just released on 2019 applications shows further significant progress, with applicants from POLAR quintile 1 increasing by another 3% on the 2018 figure. But, we cannot rest on our laurels.

As positive as the headline figures may be, the data nevertheless show that outcomes for certain groups remain lower than they should be. And we’re still not getting the most disadvantaged students into the best possible courses for them.

Our widening participation data shows White boys on free school meals have the lowest progression rates to higher education.

And there are still significant regional differences to address across the country. We know there are large differences in progression to selective universities, with White disadvantaged pupils in the North East of England around a third as likely to progress to a selective university than their White disadvantaged peers in London.

I want to see a country where the same opportunities are open to everyone irrespective of where they live. For some, that will mean staying local. And it's great to see universities like Northumbria and Sunderland in the North East doing such a great job training people up for good professional and managerial jobs in the region. But we also need to see students from the North East and other regions being able to access the most selective institutions should they indeed be the right choice for them.

That's why I welcome recent efforts from some universities to make it easier for students to attend open days. I'm delighted to see that West Midlands Railway have confirmed they will pilot free travel to the University of Worcester's open days, along with First Bus in the region. And I hope this is just the start of things to come.

I also welcome the announcement from the University of Oxford, which will be introducing a foundation year and a preparation scheme to provide additional opportunities for disadvantaged students from all over the UK. Efforts like these are absolutely what we should expect from our higher education providers today. And it is great to see world-leading institutions like Oxford standing up and doing what is right.

To make sure our efforts to improve access and participation are as effective as they can be, we need to be willing to look at the system as a whole, and to take a whole-system approach to outreach and widening participation activities.

This involves looking at the whole student body and to make sure we are not leaving certain student groups out of the picture. I want all institutions to reflect on their approach and to ask whether the way they do things can hinder some students even while helping others.

I'm thinking here about disadvantaged students. I'm thinking here about disabled students. And I'm thinking here about students with mental health issues.

It is for this reason that I have personally invested time and effort to speak to students from each of these groups over the past few months – including hosting a roundtable with visually-impaired students at the University of Birmingham.

It is also for this reason that I introduced the STEP framework in March this year – to get institutions thinking about how best to provide support for all these students and more during the three stages of Student Transition – Experience – and Progression.

The Transition phase received attention with the launch of our Education Transitions Network on University Mental Health Day. But the quality of experience is important too - in preventing drop-out and maximising attainment. As is addressing disparities in the employment outcomes of

different student groups.

That's why we cannot offer just generic support. What we need is support tailored to different student groups – including commuter students, postgraduate students, mature part-time students, international students, care leavers and estranged students, disabled students, students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, and students from the poorest parts of our society. And let's not forget the need to support the inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT+) students – particularly poignant after this month's London Pride celebrations on this, the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots.

In this day and age, nobody deserves to get left behind. And nobody should feel a university education isn't for them just because of their background or circumstance.

I want our universities and colleges today to be beacons of inclusivity. And to light the way when it comes to thinking about what different students need.

Inclusion needs to be at the heart of all institutional policy. Because it is only when inclusion becomes mainstream that we will deliver a sea change in attitudes – putting an end to the old myth that university is only for a certain type of person, from a certain type of background.

That's why I welcome the review of admissions being undertaken by the Office for Students (OfS). This is a great opportunity to look at the way current practices are operating, and to ensure they work in favour of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As Universities Minister, I want to see the sector and the OfS doing all they can to ensure we make higher education in this country more accessible for all.

Experimenting with contextual admissions is one part of this. Contextual admissions involve universities reflecting on the circumstances within which students' attainment has been achieved; for example, the nature and overall performance of the school they attend, their socio-economic background, or perhaps a difficult personal situation. Most universities already do this to some extent, but I would like the most selective, in particular, to be more ambitious in making contextual offers to recognise the untapped potential that many disadvantaged students have. There is good evidence to show that students who have had offers reduced by several grades can make excellent progress at university, provided the right support has been put in place for them.

But I recognise the government has a role to play in this too. Just take data as an example:

Over recent years, this government has been concerned with increasing the collection and publication of data in the sector – not to increase

bureaucracy as many of the critics would imply, but to tell us more about those areas which are in need of improvement, and to highlight the progress that is being made.

There's LEO data for a start. Over the last twelve months, the Department for Education has collaborated with the Institute for Fiscal studies to produce two reports on expected returns from higher education. This ground-breaking analysis allows us to estimate the financial returns for a student at age 29 compared with not attending university at all. Male students experience average returns to higher education of 6%, whilst for female students this figure is 26%. So, the financial returns of higher education are now clear for all to see.

Work is also under way to explore earnings differences over the lifetime, as well as outcomes from postgraduate study.

Then there's the Open Data Competition. Through this, we have supported the development of new, innovative digital tools for prospective students to help them better understand what outcomes they might expect from their higher education choices. And I was pleased to meet the people behind the two winning tools earlier this year, which are bringing data to life through apps that act as a personalised careers assistant or enable prospective students to take part in a game which assesses different pathways.

And all this will be complemented by the OfS review of Unistats in autumn this year – where the plan is to launch a reformed student information resource, with the goal of supporting informed choice for all.

The OfS has also recently published its access and participation dataset, which provides a consistent and transparent way to evaluate and compare provider performance between different student groups and their peers. It also allows us to identify gaps in access and outcomes.

And the OfS is promoting and supporting greater and faster progress to support disadvantaged students into and through higher education. Whilst I know there are fantastic examples of good practice in the sector, all providers need to be able to access high quality evidence of what works to enable them to make a step change in closing the gaps between students - in access, experience, and outcomes. This is why the new Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) is so important.

Ensuring we are using the right data, measuring the right things, and using data in the right way is a key priority for me. That's why one of the first things I did as Universities Minister was announce the formation of a Data Advisory Committee to discuss some of the key questions around higher education data. This Committee met for the first time at the start of this month, and we agreed actions and key challenges that we can look to address. And whatever happens to my own role as Minister in the

coming weeks, I'm proud to have established this network as an additional tool for future ministers and policymakers, to ensure we are making informed decisions and asking the right questions around data.

It's also great to see that UCAS are in the process of developing a new student hub, which will allow applicants to access much more personalised searches and advice.

As I said at the annual conference of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) last month, student support is key to their success and, on my visits to various universities around the country, I've found the work of student unions to be outstanding in this respect.

Some examples that come to mind are the enthusiasm of the students I met at the University of Huddersfield's Students' Union, where I spoke to BME students about their efforts to improve the university experience for their peers.

There's also Loughborough Students' Union, which I know is unique among British universities in that it serves members from not only Loughborough University but also Loughborough College and the RNIB College Loughborough. It was a pleasure to see students from both higher and further education communities coming together in this way and see the Students' Union as a place where aspirations can be raised.

The principle of innovation is crucial here. As policymakers – both in government and in institutions – we should be constantly innovating policies to make sure we can keep up with trends and developments. At the Education Select Committee earlier this year, I called for a 'paradigm shift' in the way we think about the provision of post-18 education, and embracing innovation is most definitely at the heart of this.

And finally, let's not forget the work we can be doing to support graduates into the world of work at the end of their studies. As I mentioned at the start of this speech, most students have already left campus for the summer or graduated from their courses. So, we shouldn't turn a blind eye to the fact that it is at this point of the year that some students and fresh graduates fall prey to unpaid internships to gain experience and get a foot on the jobs ladder.

Recent research by the Sutton Trust showed that the minimum cost of carrying out an unpaid internship here in London is £1,019 per month. So, we should be doing everything we can to stop these work placements being a privilege of the rich and making careers support more visible on campus to steer students in the right direction.

Employability needs to be weaved into the system – not just by careers teams but also by academics, who equally have a role to play in making students aware of the transferable skills they are gaining from their higher education. It's obviously not great news when almost half (49%)

of young people aged between 17 and 23 believe their education has not prepared them for the world of work – as revealed by a survey from the CBI in November last year.

So, as we look towards the summer, I want to ensure we are all taking a step back and thinking of all those who are not just set to start university this autumn, but also those who are preparing themselves to return for their second, third or fourth years. And indeed those who are heading out into the big wide world of work.

And, as this may well be my last higher education speech as Universities Minister, I want to thank the sector for all I have seen and for all it is doing in continuing to make our universities and colleges accessible, inclusive and open to all.

And I want to end today by wishing you all, at whatever stage you find yourself in the student journey, the very best – whoever you are, wherever you come from, and whatever your background.

For those who are waiting to start university this autumn, I hope you will go on to achieve great things irrespective of the grades you end up getting next month. And I am confident that with the help and support of UCAS and our university sector as a whole, you will make the choice that is right for you.

Ensuring everyone fulfils their potential and succeeds is what higher education is all about. And it's something we all have a responsibility for – this summer, next summer, and for all summers thereafter. Thank you.

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