

## Speech

## Education Secretary at HEPI conference: learning from the crisis

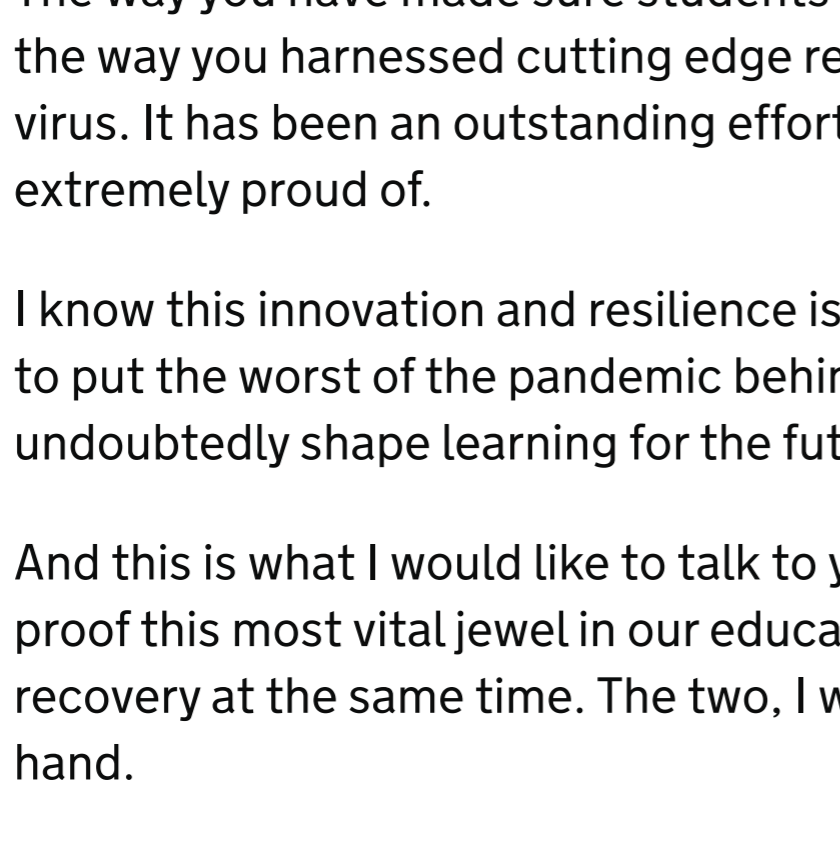
Gavin Williamson spoke to the HEPI conference on the importance of learning from the pandemic, and higher education reform.

From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP](#)  
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Hello, it is a such pleasure to be joining you today for this conference and I am honoured to open the debates, which I know are going to give us all a great deal of valuable insight.

You couldn't have chosen a more vital theme than learning from the Covid crisis and before I go any further, I want to take this opportunity to thank those of you from our universities and the wider higher education sector for all that you have done.

The way you have made sure students were able to carry on with their studies, the way you harnessed cutting edge resources and research to tackle the virus. It has been an outstanding effort and is one the entire country is extremely proud of.

I know this innovation and resilience is not going to be wasted as we prepare to put the worst of the pandemic behind us. It is something that will undoubtedly shape learning for the future.

And this is what I would like to talk to you about today. How do we future-proof this most vital jewel in our education crown and strengthen our national recovery at the same time. The two, I would suggest, very much go hand in hand.

An independent panel chaired by Sir Philip Augar made recommendations on the reform of both further and higher education. This has given us an excellent starting point and we have already addressed many of the recommendations that Sir Philip put in his report.

Despite the uncertainty of the past 18 months, there is much to be cheered by in our higher education sector. We continue to see fierce competition for places on undergraduate courses; our world-leading research, led to that incredible vaccine breakthrough in the battle against Covid.

Our universities provide the world with Nobel-winning scientists, innovators, engineers and creative artists. All of this is a sign of a sector in great health.

But we cannot and must not be complacent.

As the Augar report noted, the post-18 provision has not been delivering enough of the kind of opportunities we need, for the society that we want.

That society will increasingly expect more flexible ways to learn, including more modular, technical, and part-time learning, just as after the pandemic, it expects more flexible ways to work. This is a challenge that the government and the sector must rise to.

Last autumn the Prime Minister announced the Lifetime Loan Entitlement as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. This recognises the realities of a fast-moving economy and the changing world of work. People need and want to be able to study and train in different ways and at different times of their lives.

This will give people a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime and will make it easier for students to access courses more flexibly. It will enable people to study in a modular way or in full years of study, and fit study around work, family and personal commitments, or equally, to retrain and upskill as both their circumstances, but also the economy changes.

This is an opportunity for colleges and universities to reconsider how they can work much more closely together – to work with employers to create course content that responds to gaps in our labour market, to deliver the technical and academic skills our society so desperately needs.

I do not believe this can be done just by recycling existing approaches, and it will require a fundamental rethink of how institutions approach further and higher education provision, building on the approach some providers are already offering.

Delivering this vision is going to need action from both government and the sector to adapt to this new model, but it is a change we must make to bring true flexibility to lifelong learning.

We have already been rolling out new employer-led apprenticeships and T levels, our new technical qualifications, while our Skills for Jobs White Paper will change the entire landscape of post-16 education. Because we must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills that will lead to a fulfilling working life.

The Augar report looked at how we can give our employers the skilled workforce they and our economy need and at the same time provide good value for money. As a Government, we have begun to take steps to remove perverse incentives, such as the bizarre circumstances whereby media studies is funded at a higher rate than mathematics.

The Augar panel was clear about the need for universities to increase the number of courses which are aligned with the economy's needs. And in this respect, we need universities to go further and to act faster.

They must support and drive regional growth and productivity, particularly where that is weak. And to do this, they'll need to change, and we will not be slow to step in if those changes are not happening.

But so often we see universities around the country doing this, but we need more of you to do this more regularly. It is time for universities to follow the lead of Further Education college and look beyond what has worked in the past.

Increasingly they will need to offer more higher technical qualifications and apprenticeships. These should be geared to real jobs and the actual skills needs of local employers and the economy.

I am sure you are all familiar with the Office for Students' Proceed statistics which were published for the first-time last month. These project the likelihood new students will find some kind of professional employment or take up further study in the year after they graduate.

And while higher education remains a good investment for most, at 25 higher education institutions, fewer than half the students who begin a degree will go on to graduate employment or further study.

I want to be clear that this is not an attack on the arts. Many of our arts institutions are world leaders and every subject can be taught well, and so many universities do teach it well, and every subject can lead to good outcomes. But this is not always the case.

For example, while there are many are many good psychology courses, at one university only 39% of those who enrol in psychology go on to graduate employment or further study. This is not good enough.

While there are many good bio-science courses, at one university only 38% of those who enrol in bioscience go on to graduate employment or further study. This is not good enough.

While there are many good computing courses, at one university only 35% of those who enrol in computing go on to graduate employment or further study. Again, this is just not good enough.

This is clearly not providing the kind of outcomes that students and taxpayers would expect.

We want every student, particularly the most disadvantaged, to know that when they undertake a higher education course, they can be confident that it has a strong chance of improving their life outcomes.

As I have said, our universities are already a byword for excellence around the world. Where we lead, others follow, but the challenge for us is to make sure that no one starts overtaking us.

I welcome the Office for Students' consultation on regulating quality and standards in higher education which sets out clear foundations for driving up quality. And I expect it to lead to real results.

I want to be clear that certain practices, such as the lowering of literacy standards in degree assessments, are unacceptable and must come to an end. If a graduate begins a job without basic literacy, this serves no-one – not them, not their peers, not the employer and not the nation. It undermines the value of the British honours degree. High standards are the bedrock on which our universities' reputation rests, and they must be maintained.

We owe it to all our students, whatever their background, that at the very least they can expect a minimum standard of excellence that is going to lead to a qualification that will improve their future prospects and help them achieve their life goals.

We know this can be done because of the sheer number of providers who are already doing it and delivering high-quality courses to students from disadvantaged backgrounds with results that are far above minimum standards.

But the same cannot be said of all providers and not all students will be able to say at the end of their course that that was time and money that was well spent.

We continue to work closely with the Office for Students on ensuring that standards remain high.

I also welcome Lord Storey's Private Member's Bill that seeks to put an end to the scourge of essay mills, and we would like to work with Lord Storey to see if we can deliver it.

We expect the same rigour in admissions as we do in every other aspect of the higher education experience. Is it really in anyone's interests if entry requirements are relaxed so much that an 18-year-old who has not yet passed their English or maths GCSEs should progress straight to an honours degree?

We have to make sure that those with an ability can go to university if they have the desire and application to do so, as long as they can prove they are up to it.

In recent years, we have seen far too many unconditional offers and other practices which undermine the reputation of some of our institutions.

Which brings me to schools. One way which universities can better support their community is to work with schools, whether that's by sponsoring schools, or supporting a robust curriculum, or running summer camps.

Genuine social mobility, the ability to break away from the restrictions of social or geographical disadvantage, doesn't just begin and end with helping students get the grades they need to get into university, but by inspiring them to want to go in the first place, by inspiring them to achieve so much more for themselves and then by giving them much more support when they're there.

I know that some universities already do this, but we want it to become the norm, the default setting for every university.

We have seen some fantastic initiatives from universities to drive up opportunity, from Cambridge's new foundation year to Nottingham Trent's outreach initiative in Mansfield. But there is still a widely held view that our current admissions system is not working as well as it should and could.

What we need is equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. As the Chair of the Office for Students said in a recent speech, widening admissions is never an excuse for lowering standards. And I have been clear in the job advert for the new Director for Fair Access and Participation that a key priority for them will be to challenge courses not delivering positive outcomes for students.

I have spoken about the fact that our universities justifiably have a reputation for excellence around the world. Our academics deliver for us on so many levels, whether that's in their research, their teaching or their innovation. But I want to make sure that they are not struggling to do all this with one hand tied behind their backs.

Universities need to constantly question the way they do things, especially if processes are starting to make life more complicated rather than the reverse.

So, I want you to be ruthless in your housekeeping: let us do away with the monitoring and form filling, the targets, the processes, the endless external schemes, the creeping managerialism.

Let us free academics to do what they do best – world-class teaching and world class research.

I've made clear to the OFS that I want them to be doing the same thing in their work, and I know that Lord Wharton is absolutely committed to doing so.

Despite all that, despite all that has happened over the past year, we are as committed as ever to our manifesto pledges and are determined to support and improve an excellent education system to help level up society, right across the country.

For me universities play such a vital and pivotal role in achieving that aim. We need to be changing what we did before. We need to adapt and prestige of our new ways of working. We are going to ensure the global brand of our universities will continue to shine undimmed throughout the world. You are so important to our nation, to our future, to the delivery of the government aims, and I know that working together we can rise to that challenge. Thank you.

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