Is there a crisis of confidence in our universities?

Universities are under intense scrutiny and in danger of being unfairly categorised as elite, aloof and detached from individuals, communities and day-to-day challenges.

In the UK, it seems to be open season on universities. Whether it is attacks on the value of a degree, problems with the tuition fees system, senior staff being overpaid, or problems with international students, universities are this summer’s scapegoat of choice.

Whether it is open season or silly season, it has attracted the attention of some prominent commentators, who have taken time out from their summer breaks to catalogue the litany of failings in our university sector.

While universities should certainly be scrutinised and held to account, much of this criticism has been based on little in the way of evidence or context. Indeed, some attacks have lacked any factual accuracy at all.

We’ve seen a post-truth summer of misinformation, muddled argument and even a little malicious intent.

Let’s see if we can follow a post-truth summer with an evidence-based autumn.

Universities are forces for good in our world.

Let us be clear about the powerful and positive impact of our universities, they
- transform people’s lives through access to higher education;
- support local communities by creating jobs and providing services;
- strengthen economies through skills, research, innovation;
- improve our society through the impact of our research, through invention and discovery;

Universities are not in crisis, they are positive and powerful institutions delivering deep and lasting value to communities in all corners of the world, but universities do have some serious reputational issues that need addressing.

It is time for universities to address this crisis of confidence.

We have a major challenge. Now is the moment for universities to shine and prove their value...
Today, I want to issue a rally call...

It is time to fight back...

we need to respond to these reputational challenges, robustly, with evidence, promoting our values, promoting our impact and engaging with diverse range of audiences.

This afternoon I'm going to focus evidence. I will highlight why we should be proud and confident about universities to challenge this notion of a crisis of confidence.

In particular, I want us to consider three questions:

- What are the big misconceptions that are fuelling a crisis of confidence?
- What are the evidence-based ripostes to these challenges?
- What can universities do to turn the tide and enhance our reputations?

What are the big misconceptions that are fuelling a crisis of confidence?

There are three big myths being peddled that are fuelling a crisis of confidence:

1) **getting a degree isn't worth it, you're better off not going to university**
   there are too many graduates anyway...

2) **universities are ivory towers, they do nothing for local communities**...
   universities just benefit the elite not the person on the street

3) **universities are focused on international links to the detriment of local people**
   there are too many international students at our universities...

These misconceptions need to be addressed... so **what are the evidence-based ripostes to these challenges?**
The claim that getting a degree isn’t worth it, that you’re better off not going to university does not stack up when you look at the evidence.

Graduates, across the world, benefit from a university education and are in high demand.

In the UK, graduates earn substantially more than graduates, even when the costs of fees, loans and taxes are taken in to account.

A UK Government study showed that women with a degree earn on average £252,000 more over their lifetime than non-graduates. Men with degrees earn on average £168,000 more than those without.

The most recent official Office for National Statistics graduate labour market study published in April 2017 suggests an even higher graduate premium. It said that in 2016, working age graduates (aged 16-64) had an annual salary £9,500 higher on average than non-graduates. If you work for 40 years, this is almost £400,000 additional earnings over your lifetime.

Graduates are also far less likely to be unemployed. The unemployment rate for graduates is also, less than half that for non-graduates.

But graduate ‘success’ not just about salaries. Let us not forget that graduate salaries are not the only measure of success. Some universities specialise in fields such as the arts, the creative industries, nursing and public-sector professions that, despite making an essential contribution to society and the economy, pay less on average.

Going to university can transform people’s lives and improve life chances. In the UK, entry rates for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are at their highest ever levels. In 2016, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in England were 74% more likely to enter higher education than they were 10 years ago.

As universities, we should celebrate this progress – while recognising that there is still more to do.

A university education has also been shown to be a good route to health and happiness. Studies show that on average, graduates enjoy better health, wellbeing and life satisfaction.
So, do not let anyone get away with saying that a university education isn’t worth it.

And do not let anyone get away with the claim that there are too many graduates.

Across the world, employers are saying they want to employ more not less graduates, the rate of new graduate jobs is growing. In the UK, 74% of new jobs created by 2020 will be in occupations with the highest amount of graduates.

The graduates leaving our universities are also increasingly in demand from employers and continue to benefit from their degrees. The latest graduate market research from High Fliers showed that Britain’s top employers were expecting to increase graduate recruitment – for the fifth year running – by 4.3% in 2017.

According to some commentators, university degrees are no longer valued and people are turning their backs on higher education in droves. In reality, despite the fall in the number of 18 and 19-year-olds across Britain since 2010, the rate of applications from this age group is at record levels.

And now on to my second myth...

The claim that universities just benefit the elite not the person on the street. The misconception that universities are ivory towers, that they do nothing for local communities.

It’s right that politicians and the public expect universities to be more than ivory towers, to deliver value to communities beyond the campus boundary. As universities, we need to more effectively demonstrate our public value and engage with diverse communities.

Universities deliver private benefits to graduates and they also deliver huge amounts of public good. Universities deliver benefits to everyone across society, including those who haven't been to university, in every community.

Universities train the people that every community relies upon... our teachers, our doctors, our engineers, innovators and wealth-creators. Currently, at UK universities: 63,000 nurses, 62,000 doctors and dentists; and 75,000 teachers are being trained.
Universities contribute more than £73bn to the UK economy, nearly 3% of UK GDP, and support more than 750,000 jobs across every region. These are not just jobs at universities, these are a wide variety of jobs in local communities.

Universities transform local economies and communities. Universities are often the largest employers in their locality with many other jobs dependent on the expenditure of universities and their students.

Universities also produce cutting edge research that changes lives.

Medical advances which allow people to live longer, new cures for diseases and discoveries that prevent illness.

Engineering expertise and advances at universities means that people benefit from better houses, faster trains and new technologies.

Universities research has a positive impact on communities across the world – reducing pollution, tackling climate change, improving clean water supplies and building understanding between people of different cultures.

Universities in the UK have been the seeding ground for many of today’s greatest life-changing discoveries. Research conducted in UK Universities has contributed to such discoveries as: the LCD computer screen, the structure of DNA, fibre optics, developing IVF treatment and the world wide web.

Universities provide facilities for the community, for example sports centres shared with schools; free legal advice to local residents, support services to businesses; apply their research expertise to local priorities, and act as vocal advocates for their town, city or region.

There are 4 million public visits to university galleries and museums.

750,000 students volunteer in communities.

However, given that there are still occasions when universities are seen as ivory towers, there is more that we need to do to promote our positive local impact.
When you return to your campuses, you must redouble your efforts to tackle the myth that universities just benefit the elite and not the person on the street.

And now on to my third myth...

**That universities are too focused on international links to the detriment of local people. And the specific claim that there are too many international students at our universities**

I make no apologies for our universities being global institutions, but we must get better at explaining why our international links benefit our local communities.

We are best when we are outward looking, globally networked and welcoming to the world. We want to play a role in working with international counterparts to address the great global challenges of our age, to seek out and work with the best minds wherever they are.

But being international doesn't mean we're not having positive local impact. Indeed, it's our global links that make our local impact stronger from attracting inward investment to joint research on the big challenges of our age.

Overseas students play a vital role in thriving local economies. The on and off-campus spending by international students and their visitors – generates almost £26bn a year for the UK economy.

This spending supports jobs across the UK – their off-campus spending alone generated 206,600 full-time equivalent jobs in communities across every region of the UK.

One major national study suggested that each international student supports 0.45 British. That means that for every a 100 international students they come to study in the UK, 45 jobs are created.

To illustrate this further – this economic activity and employment that is sustained by international students’ off-campus spending generated £1 billion tax revenues. This annual tax revenue is enough to pay the salaries of 31,700 nurses or 25,000 police officers.
But the value of international student and staff is about much more than money and jobs. International students and staff provide many other benefits, academically and culturally.

Students and academics from other countries enrich the academic experience and campus life for all students. Campuses are international communities, provide students them with early global experience and cultural understanding.

International staff and students provide skills and ideas that can enrich communities, towns and cities across the UK, and help build the future prosperity of the country as a whole.

Our international alumni that add so much to the UK’s soft power around the world. Many return home having forged strong professional and personal links that provide long-term benefits for Britain.

From Aberdeen to Plymouth, from Norwich to Belfast students and staff from overseas are providing benefits to local communities.

For example, here in Birmingham, the University of Birmingham provides itself one being a leading global university with strong international links. But this international profile is not to the detriment of its local impact, far from it.

A major study in 2016 showed that the University of Birmingham impact on the economy and local community:

- generates £3.5bn every year to the economy;
- supported over 15,000 jobs in the West Midlands region, with almost one in 50 jobs in Birmingham depending upon the University;
- has over 300,000 alumni across the globe; they become advocates for the region and the UK when they return home.
- has more than 22,000 school pupils participating in the university's outreach activity each year;
- had around 1,700 people, who completed a programme at the university then move on to work in the healthcare sector – they are the nurses, doctors, dentist the local community needs
- Over 6,000 students volunteered their time
- More than 260,000 people attended public events at the University

It is our job to tell the story of why our international outlook is good for our local communities. We need to do this more effectively and to a wider range of people -
to illustrate why international links our universities make are important to everyone, not just important to the people who run universities.

So, I’ve suggest what I believe are some of the biggest misconceptions and made evidence based arguments to counter these claims.

So, let us now turn to the question: **what can universities do to turn the tide and enhance our reputations?**

There are four suggestions I want to make:

1. **Firstly, we must fight back with evidence...**

Cabinet Minister MP Michael Gove famously said ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’. I say ‘It's time for revenge of the experts...’

We are society’s truth seekers, building knowledge and promoting understanding must be at the core of our work.

We should be robust in challenging evidence-less claims, we should not be shy in responding to incorrect assertions and using facts to combat myths.

We need also to support our academic experts to share their expertise in an accessible way... on TV, radio, newspapers, social media, at events, with our communities

Which leads me to my second suggestion:

2. **We need to develop compelling narratives about our positive impact**

We need great stories and examples, to share insights in to how universities transformed individuals lives. This means we must find compelling personal stories, unusual characters and impressive feats.

There is a danger that we slip into talking about these things in an administrative way: we need to talk more about the **purpose** of what we do – creating new knowledge and sharing it widely, with as wide a possible pool of the people who can benefit.
For a university to thrive, its reputation must be carefully managed, its research impact effectively promoted to the public, the value of a degree explained to prospective students and a wide variety of messages regularly and clearly communicated.

We must evidence and explain impact, including promoting complex research in an accessible way to the public, varying narratives to engage diverse communities.

3. Thirdly, we must recognise that although there is more we can do to explain our value and impact, just explaining, isn’t enough.

To enhance our reputation, we must do much more than broadcast messages, we need to develop proper long-term engagement and build a shared understanding with our communities. This means listening to and understanding concerns, addressing challenges and adapting when are our engagement isn’t working.

We should constantly strive for deeper and better engagement with our communities to increase the value we deliver, socially, economically - and particularly locally. We must redouble our efforts to engage with diverse audiences in new and innovative ways, seeking to find new opportunities to add value.

4. Fourthly, I believe we should promote our values as well as our impact.

Universities should champion our values and explaining why these matter and are of benefit to today’s world.

We must redouble our efforts to promote the values of openness, diversity, internationalism, freedom of speech, tolerance – that make British universities the envy of the world.

Why should explain why these matter, why they increase our positive impact on society and why they are of benefit to today’s world.

In conclusion, I want to repeat my rallying call.

It’s time to fight back... it is time for universities to address this crisis of confidence.

Universities are positive and powerful institutions delivering deep and lasting value to communities in all corners of the world.
Universities are forces for good in our world.

We need to respond to reputational challenges, robustly, with evidence, promoting our values, promoting our impact and engaging with diverse range of audiences.

Now is the time to demonstrate the huge value and positive impact of universities

Your universities need you to rise to the challenge