

President's address – Universities UK Annual Conference 2018
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Welcome colleagues and guests to this Universities UK conference which is taking place in our centenary year. And a very warm welcome to our minister who joins us for this morning's session.

It is usual at the annual conference for the President to speak about the challenges of the day and how, collectively, vice-chancellors, principals, our senior leadership teams and sector bodies can address them. Take, for example:

- how to fund our university system fairly and sustainably
- unease about pension schemes
- concerns about public support for universities, and
- the importance of international collaborations and global connections

While these could have been items on the UUK Board agenda discussed yesterday (and indeed many were) they are, in fact, the matters frustrating our forefathers (and of course they were all fathers) back in the early days of the organisation which would, eventually, become Universities UK.

In 1918, amidst the devastation heaped upon Europe by the Great War, it is not an overstatement to say that universities shone as beacons of hope.

Across the Atlantic, university and college leaders had been discussing how American higher education could contribute to the war effort and, indeed, to the peace that would follow. This group would – by summer 1918 – become the American Council on Education (ACE).

And here in the UK, just 11 days after Armistice Day, the first recorded meeting of the Standing Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals took place, chaired by Sir Donald MacAlister who rose from humble beginnings to study medicine at Oxford and become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Glasgow.

What UUK and ACE have in common is the articulation of a founding mission which has at its heart the creation of a united sector – despite diversity of geography, size and specialism – in a shared dedication to work for the good of society.

We must, as UUK in its various incarnations has done over the past century, continue to seek and suggest solutions, to be constructive and creative in our challenge to the government of the day, and to reflect on and refresh our role and mission in society.

And so today I have three priority areas where the UK's universities want to work with the UK government in common cause:

Firstly, we need to create the right conditions for the UK to be the country of choice for talented international students

Secondly, we need stability and sustainability of university funding and a financial support system which encourages, rather than deters, students from seeking a university education if this is right for them

And thirdly, we need continued opportunities for our academics and students to collaborate and expand the frontiers of knowledge post-Brexit.

Let me elaborate.

Firstly – I'd like to talk about the UK as a destination for international students

Politicians and the public unite around one fact when it comes to universities: that is, the UK's university sector is one which is a matter for pride: our work benefits all.

And so today's global students – wherever they live – should be looking to the UK's universities as the number one destination of choice.

At a time when, as a nation, we need to be more global in our outlook, more connected and attractive to the rest of the world, leveraging our outstanding strengths in research and teaching to the advantage of the UK, our international student numbers have stagnated.

There is a clear and ever-harder-to-ignore link between changes to the visa system and our international student numbers flat-lining while those in countries like Australia, Canada and Germany rise. These nations are tapping into the growing number of students who want to study outside their home countries.

We have long known that the opportunity to work in their host country following graduation forms part of the decision making process for international students. But in recent years the paucity of post-study work options in the UK has become a reason for them to look elsewhere.

But we can work with government to change this.

That is why UUK is calling for a new global talent visa to allow international students to gain work experience in the UK for up to two years after graduation.

We have been listening to business leaders and employers – especially SMEs – in towns and cities across the UK. They tell us there are skills gaps they cannot plug, but they are turning down qualified international graduates because of the high costs and bureaucracy involved in sponsoring a graduate on a Tier 2 visa.

Our solution is to build on the expertise and knowledge within universities, and the high levels of compliance across our sector, to support employers and, indeed, help a wider range of employers than ever before to take on talented international students for a specified period before they return home.

And it's not just universities and business welcoming UUK's visa proposals, but the public too. New polling suggests that nearly three quarters of British adults think that international students should be able to stay in the UK post-graduation for one year or more to gain work experience.

To turn now to funding matters

At that first meeting of UUK's predecessor body, back in 1918, university finance was high on the agenda, with members agreeing that "the present *system* of allocating the grants is satisfactory, but not the *scale*."

Five years later, at the 1923 annual gathering of vice-chancellors, members took part in a discussion of university funding where one of their number summed up a position which still has resonance today:

"Education benefits, one, the state, two, the individual, and three, the locality or neighbourhood in which the university is situated... the presumption, which I see no reason to challenge, is that the three beneficiaries should contribute to the support of the university in approximately equal proportions."

As you heard last night from Lord Willetts, there is a sense of déjà vu when considering university funding policy. Once again, we have a major post-18 review of HE and FE funding in England – and we will hear more from its chair, Philip Augar, later today.

While political pressures arguably triggered this review, the government should aspire to outcomes which are long-term and far-reaching, and avoid short-term fixes which may ultimately backfire.

Fee differentiation, by subject of study or graduate earnings, is not without risk. A cut in the headline fee, for example, will not solve the widespread misunderstanding of the student finance system. Nor will it eradicate the deep-rooted fears around debt. Returning to an era when student numbers in England were capped would be a backward step which government should avoid.

The Augar review - and its subsequent implementation - provides a fantastic opportunity to improve the system for students in a number of ways.

It should offer solutions to address the long-term decline in part-time and mature student numbers. It should increase financial support for those most in need through targeted maintenance grants to reduce fears about the cost of living. It should help students move more easily between further and higher education according to their needs. And it should strive to improve understanding of the progressive nature of student loans and the value of a degree for students.

We know our Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds, and Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, are personally committed to increasing social mobility. Disadvantaged 18-year-olds in England were 82% more likely to enter university in 2017 than in 2006. So let us build on the foundations and successes already in place.

With increased demand by employers for higher level skills, this review should ensure that the system of funding supports learners from all backgrounds to reach their potential throughout their lifetimes, and that of course includes mature and part-time students in addition to 18-year-olds living away from home.

The review must help us continue to raise aspirations, not limit them.

Of course England is not alone in wrestling with these issues.

In Scotland, the political focus on widening access for the most socio-economically disadvantaged 20% of the population has been relentless. Universities Scotland has

worked hard to demonstrate that university leaders can be trusted to drive this action, but we also need this to be matched with real progress in closing the school-level attainment gap. And success in widening access will need to be matched by the expansion of funded places in Scotland.

In Wales, the Diamond Review's findings that living costs are the main barrier for those deciding whether to go to university, alongside the desire to do more to support part-time, post-graduate and mature students, has led to the introduction of what many are calling the most progressive and generous package of maintenance support in the UK.

And now, to Brexit...

As one of the UK's most global and outward-looking sectors, it comes as no surprise that internationalism has never been far from the thoughts of vice-chancellors. Early CVCP meetings focused on the importance of attracting international PhD students and building global connections.

Following the First World War, attention was also paid to the problems facing universities in Europe: particularly in Austria, Yugoslavia and Hungary, with calls for the British government to support these institutions.

One hundred years on, this summer's Brexit white paper acknowledged the importance of attracting world-class researchers and international students to our shores. However, with only 205 days until we depart the EU, there are still many unanswered questions and unresolved issues.

We understand the complexity of this unprecedented event. But for universities, the uncertainty is as damaging as a difficult outcome.

- We need greater certainty that we will be able to recruit EU students and staff, collaborate easily with our European partners, and continue to grow outward student mobility to Europe and beyond
- We need the continued mutual recognition of professional qualifications – for our doctors, nurses, lawyers and architects to name but a few
- We need a satisfactory agreement on the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border that protects and promotes collaboration with our nearest neighbour, and
- We need government to engage more meaningfully with devolved administrations to ensure an effective settlement can be achieved UK-wide.

Since the referendum result, our sector has worked constructively with government. Our academics have shared their expertise, our staff and students have highlighted issues which must be addressed, and collectively we have attempted to provide solutions rather than snipe from the sidelines.

But, in common with organisations such as the CBI, we must now prepare for the possibility of 'no deal' and the disruption this will bring.

UUK's Board therefore calls on the government to boost stability over the coming months. This means:

- Committing to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU nationals working, studying or entering the UK as of 31 December 2020
- Ensuring that any substantive changes to EU migration rules are preceded by a period of two years to allow universities and prospective staff and students to prepare for any new system; and
- Setting out contingency plans for replacing access to Erasmus+ so that UK students do not miss out on the transformational experience of spending time studying, volunteering or working abroad.

[Public perception]

Those were my three areas of challenge for government, but I also have three areas of challenge for colleagues here today.

Firstly, we must do more to earn the public's trust and in particular to battle negative perceptions

Secondly, we must commit to ensuring that the support we offer our students while they are with us allows them to reach their full potential

Thirdly, we should commit to being more active and visible ambassadors on the local, national and international stage.

Universities have always had a public image problem. UUK's archives show that as far back as the 1922 conference, vice-chancellors were discussing the need to improve the public's understanding of universities and to battle against perceptions of elitism and relevance.

It is still very much a live issue.

Almost three-quarters of the public say they are proud of universities, and believe our sector plays an important role in helping the UK meet future challenges. But while they are positive about us, they simply don't know enough about what we do, why we do it and what we stand for in order to be fully-fledged advocates.

We need to respond to this pride and interest in our sector by being more open and engaged, by listening to the public and talking about the issues they want to know more about, and by having these conversations in the places where they spend time – whether that is in the local media, online or face-to-face.

Over the next year I would encourage individual vice-chancellors to be more visible on the 'hot' topics:

- to do more to explain where student fees go, how we price courses and to publish value for money statements
- to talk about the decisions that we, and our councils, make on senior pay, and
- to explain the careful consideration we give to ensure freedom of speech on our campuses.

We also need to show leadership in addressing political and public concerns before they become problems. In the coming 12 months UUK will take the lead in revising the *concordat to support research integrity*.

Mere compliance will only take us so far. It is the culture in which research is undertaken that matters far more than any concordat, regulation or funding requirement. So, UUK will work to promote all that is good about a research career, and support new initiatives where there is room for improvement.

We will also do more to tackle the notion that we are 'giving away' Firsts and 2:1s. The sector has changed significantly in recent years. Universities are putting more emphasis than ever before on the quality of teaching and investing in technology and learning support, and our students are working hard – perhaps harder than previous generations of students – to get the most out their time at university. But is this all that's going on?

Over the next year UUK will work with sector partners to gather evidence on what is behind the rise in degree outcomes, balancing the effects of legitimate improvement in teaching, support and student efforts with other factors. We will then make recommendations to ensure that today's students, employers and the public can have confidence in the ongoing value of a UK degree.

I would like to turn now to an area where today's university leaders are very engaged that didn't feature on the agenda at 1918's meeting: student support.

In 2018, leading and embedding a whole institution approach on issues such as the mental health and wellbeing of our students, a zero tolerance approach to harassment and hate crime, and improving outcomes and employment opportunities for all our students is an increasingly important part of our role.

There are no quick fixes to these issues, many of which we see playing out in sectors beyond education but we must continue to learn from one another and support one another so we, in turn, can support our students and staff.

These challenges are acute throughout the UK. Part of the benefit of the diversity of the UK's higher education sector is the scope to try new approaches in different places. For instance, this month every university staff member in Scotland will receive a card telling them what to do if they come across gender-based violence. Let's keep learning from different approaches to build the best possible response.

Universities have experienced sharp increases in the number of people accessing support services, with some institutions noticing a threefold increase over the past five years. Over the next year UUK will be building on work with schools, colleges, the NHS and charities such as Student Minds to ensure that the coordination of care between the NHS and universities and transitions from school to university can be improved.

While official statistics published this year showed higher education students in England and Wales had a significantly lower suicide rate compared with the general population of similar ages, one suicide is one too many. I know many of us have seen first-hand the devastation this causes for families, for friends, for the student community, and for our staff long after the tragedy. That is why later today, we will be launching important new guidance on understanding, preventing and responding to student suicides.

We will also do more this year to understand and to tackle some of the educational inequalities which exist for black and minority ethnic students. While 78% of white students who graduated last year ended up with top degrees, 66% of Asian students achieved the same, and just 53% of black students.

The factors which contribute to these gaps are complex and multifaceted with a student's social and economic background, as well as their individual university experience, playing a part. But, as Baroness Amos who is leading our joint UUK-NUS work in this area, has pointed out, it is clear that: "Something else is going on". We need to identify and address that "something". Reducing and ultimately eliminating these discrepancies, and improving equality of opportunity involves hard, sustained work right across the university sector, both individually and collectively.

UUK as membership organisation has its roots in vice-chancellors coming together to be more than just higher education leaders. We have a vital role to play in fostering relationships, developing partnerships and being thought leaders in our communities.

Now more than ever, we need to commit to a more public, ambassadorial role, not just for our sector but for UK plc on the global stage.

The UK's universities are more globally linked than almost any other higher education sector in the world. However, in an increasingly complex and interconnected world such university partnerships are coming under increasing political pressure with calls for UK universities to rethink their collaborations with a range of countries.

The question of whether and how UK universities should engage in international partnerships and links is one that has been debated for years. It was raised again recently as a delegation of university leaders from the UK, of which I was a part, visited Egypt to explore higher education and research collaboration.

There are complexities arising from collaborations in any jurisdiction. Governments change, and with this change the imperatives of the ruling party potentially impact on everything from trade and immigration policies to conditions for academic freedom, even rights to IP. At a recent conference jointly sponsored by UUK and the European Universities Association we debated university autonomy and heard an account from Hungary, for instance, of significant political challenges to higher education.

So what should we, as university leaders, do?

It is clear that some global links and partnerships present major risks and difficult questions for universities. We have to consider the ethical implications when engaging in any agreement with international partners or governments, and manage these relationships in a climate where political and social imperatives in a country can shift overnight.

The easy option would be for the UK's universities to scale back their international collaborations. This, I believe, would be a backward and damaging step.

UK universities' global connections provide genuine benefits for the UK, and for countries, academics and individuals around the world. The links we foster encourage more international research collaboration and enable academics to carry out life-changing research across countries and cultures. These partnerships help increase intercultural understanding and international engagement, as well as enhancing the UK's soft power.

When I worked as a special advisor to the then Education Select Committee, UUK used to be routinely referred to by members as a 'Trade Association'. The late lamented Sir David Watson famously borrowed from 'Yes Minister' to describe UUK

as being, all too often, 'a hotbed of cold feet'. We need to work hard, in ways I have begun to describe here, to prove that we associate, we come together not to avoid or shrink from answering the difficult questions but in order to communicate the fact that finding the answers to the most difficult questions of our age is our mission and purpose.

We are looking back over the last one hundred years, a century in which our values and our vision have remained constant. We are here to educate, to inform and to enlighten but also to subvert and to question. Our role is to create knowledge and develop relationships for the good of society – locally, nationally and internationally. And here's to the next 100 years – whatever they may bring.

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