CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Secretary of State and minister, for joining us this morning and for expressing such positive sentiments towards the sector. We look forward to working with you both over the months ahead.

We come together here in Birmingham at a time of significant change for the United Kingdom. While there are undoubtedly challenges ahead for the sector, our universities represent opportunities: for individuals, for the country and for our future.

As our new prime minister - and my local MP, Boris Johnson - rightly mentioned in his first speech outside Number 10, our universities are admired and loved around the world.
But it is not the institutions we should be celebrating, but the people within them who make our universities what they are. And so this morning – and indeed throughout my presidency – I want to focus on the people in our higher education sector, our students, our alumni, our researchers, our academics, our professional and support staff, and, yes, our leaders, who together transform universities into the national asset they are – renowned across the world for the quality of their education and research and for their positive impact on economic growth and social and cultural prosperity.

This is, of course, my inaugural conference speech as President of Universities UK, having taken over from Professor Dame Janet Beer in August. Janet was President during a period of uncertainty and upheaval – three different universities ministers in Westminster, three different Brexit secretaries and three different education secretaries - and major sector changes including the launch of the Office for Students and UKRI. I would like to say an enormous thank you to Janet both personally and on behalf of all of us for her incredible work in representing the sector and I am delighted to be building on her achievements.
Our universities are home to some of the most cutting-edge research facilities on the planet, places where research teams come together to advance knowledge and tackle the major global challenges we face.

Our universities are home to some of the greatest artistic and cultural collections and facilities in the world – like this great symphony hall - open to the public, inspiring the next generation of archaeologists, artists, musicians, curators and instilling a love of creativity, art and culture in local communities as well as in our staff and students.

Our universities are home to well-being, sports and educational facilities which help our students develop and flourish and support the health and welfare of local residents – from schoolchildren to sports stars.
But, too often universities are described in terms of buildings, campuses or ivory towers. Indeed, referring to ourselves as a sector reinforces this. What we are is a community of people: over 2.3 million students and almost 420,000 members of staff. We are places where people - from all over the world - come together with shared passions and ambitions and a desire to better their own lives and the lives of others.

In his first week in office, our new prime minister, Boris Johnson, spoke of the need to ‘level up’ opportunities for families and for communities across all four nations. This is exactly what universities do.

We are international, we are diverse, we are innovative, and we are committed to making a positive difference to individuals, to the towns, cities and regions in which we are based, to the health and wealth of the nation and to global prosperity.
Putting people first is central to what we do, whether that is through equipping our students to embark on fulfilling careers, confronting difficult societal problems or finding solutions to the pressing issues of our time - from tackling climate change to improving health and wellbeing - and boosting the UK economy at a time of profound uncertainty.

Our MadeAtUni campaign, launched last December, showcases many fine examples of the ways in which the people at the heart of our universities are progressing ideas, research and initiatives that benefit the lives of everyone. So far, the campaign has reached an impressive 46 million people. But just because the message has carried, it doesn’t mean it has hit home. Over the coming year, we must keep up the good work, consider new ways we can reach people and help them understand what we do – and not just play to our own crowd.

One challenge consistently levelled at us all is how to define value for students and how to address concerns that some courses offer poor value.
But much of the debate on value has been framed very narrowly by policy makers, politicians and commentators. It has lacked nuance, it has failed to look beyond salary outcomes and, crucially, it has failed to understand what motivates today’s students and recent graduates.

Those of us from universities here today know from the time we spend at open days with prospective students and their families, speaking to our own students, and celebrating the achievements of our graduates, that salary and status are not everything for this generation. Graduate recruiters say that the questions today’s graduates ask at the end of job interviews are more focused on “What is the culture like and how will you support me?” rather than “What will you pay me?” with wellbeing, personal development, diversity and civic responsibilities highly prized.

What message does it send to our young people when they hear that the value of their university education and experience is judged solely on the money they earn when they graduate?
Do we really want to send a message to our nursing and social care students or our trainee teacher that their degree holds less value simply because they earn less than other graduates?

Or that a degree in the creative arts – a sector which generates more than £100 billion a year to the UK economy and accounts for 1 in 11 jobs – is held in lower esteem?

If we are genuinely to improve how we define value and address concerns about poor value, then first we should ask what value means to those who are at the heart of the system – not politicians, not journalists, but today’s students – Generation Z – and the millennials who make up our recent graduates. And that’s just what UUK has done.

New UK-wide research, which will be presented later this morning, shows that 8 in 10 of the students and recent graduates surveyed think that the government should do more to promote the many other benefits of studying at university, defining value and the benefit of a university education much more broadly than simply by future earnings alone.
Studying a subject that really interests them, having an opportunity to broaden their horizons, meeting diverse people and hearing diverse views and engaging in debates on topics that matter to our communities and to our society; these are the things that motivate many current students and recent graduates. I am truly heartened that the values which our sector holds dear – working for the good of the public and communities, championing tolerance and celebrating diversity – are reflected in these findings.

It is also clear that opportunities to access university at different points in their lives are critically important to students. And foundation years provide a means for tens of thousands of students to do just that every year.

When UUK asked its members what recommendations in the independent panel’s report on the funding of post-18 education caused them most concern, many highlighted the proposal to withdraw financial support for foundation years attached to degree courses.
It is a fair challenge, to demonstrate the impact and worth of this route of entry to a degree. But it is also obvious from the analysis that UUK has undertaken, that Foundation Years provide a crucial stepping-stone into universities for individuals with high potential but non-traditional entry qualifications.

In England in 2017/18, 47% of foundation year entrants were from a BAME background and 15% were from the most disadvantaged areas in the country.

And 49% of the mature students who enrol on degree programmes to reskill based on their work experience access university via foundation year courses.

And our analysis shows that foundation courses work. 86% of foundation year students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds progressed to degree study, compared to 57% who took other routes. Many entered strategically important courses such as engineering, physics and biological science.
Ultimately this is about choice – giving individuals the option to decide which path is best for them and their aspirations. I look forward to making a positive case for supporting foundation years to ministers and policymakers.

The post-18 review provide a number of areas of challenge for higher education providers; challenges which Universities UK and its members are responding to over the coming months.

We are taking the lead in looking at the issue of value – how it is defined, measured and communicated, and evidencing the steps universities are taking to promote efficiency and improve understanding of a university cost base.

We are doing more to consider how we develop and enable a system that supports lifelong learning - identifying current barriers, proposing solutions, and addressing the practical issues on delivering a credit-based system and lifelong loans.
We are developing a vision for universities’ role in delivering level 4 and 5 qualifications, including identifying opportunities for universities to grow their role and strengthen their partnerships with FE to meet skills needs.

We are undertaking a review to establish the evidence, best practice and inform the debate around university admissions which aims to build greater levels of transparency, trust and public understanding in admissions practices.

And we continue our work to take action to grip the issue of grade inflation and to demonstrate the sector’s ability to maintain the value of a UK qualification.
Amidst the current political turmoil, the prospect of a general election remains high. And universities have a fundamental and varied role to play. Universities UK will set out a positive vision for the sector - including the manifesto commitments we would like political parties to make. Commitments such as the reinstatement of maintenance grants for those students in greatest need and recognising the need for long-term sustainable funding for teaching and research. This would build on the positive comments in the Chancellor’s Spending Round speech last week where he promised to turbocharge our ambition on research and development.

But we have a wider role to play too – by encouraging voter registration so students are able to cast their vote whether they are at home or at university, fostering debate on campus, giving students the skills to distinguish facts from fiction, and facilitating events to enable our local communities to engage with the democratic process.

I have focused so far on domestic issues, but we are, of course, one of the most international sectors. And with the government’s new international education strategy, announced earlier this year, we have a golden opportunity to reset the narrative. A chance to turbo-charge our global potential.
For years, we have looked on with envy as many of our competitors have embarked on ambitious international education strategies. Australia, Canada, Germany and emerging markets, such as China, that we ignore at our peril.

Despite a challenging policy environment, we have remained the second most popular destination for international students – *but only just* - although we have lost considerable ground to our rivals in recent years and others are now snapping on our heels.

It is a strategy which requires cross-government action and one which acknowledges that - until now - we have punched above our weight but below our potential.

It means the time is right for changes to our immigration system, and here we have some long-awaited and hard-fought good news. Yesterday’s announcement on a new two-year post-study work visa provides the bold boost our universities need.
Competitive advantage reports compiled by UUK clearly show the exceptional foundations upon which we can build - with the UK ranked first for student experience across multiple measures. And our recent report on the graduate outcomes of more than 16,000 former international students shows the exceptional premium that exists for international students who come to the UK as well as the long-term benefits we gain as a country from graduates who want to trade, connect, research and work with us. Improvements to our post-study work offer are another important piece of the jigsaw.

In recent announcements, government has shown that it understands the importance of our international activities for the future of this country.

My message to government – to education ministers and to the new prime minister - is this: continue to work with us to meet – and beat – the targets set out in the international education strategy and make UK universities the number one global destination.
And so, to Brexit. There is no shying away from the fact that ‘no deal’ – whether this is in 49 days’ time or further down the line - is not what our sector wants. The risks and challenges will be significant and could impact the sector for decades to come.

UUK has recently undertaken survey to see how prepared our members are for Brexit, the results of which will be published shortly.

It is welcome to see from the survey that all the universities that responded have prepared for no deal to some extent. But we can’t address every risk alone. While the news that universities feel prepared for no deal in some capacity is reassuring, the implications of exit under these circumstances remain largely unknown. It is in the government’s power to alleviate many of these concerns.

With the clock ticking, there are many outstanding questions, not least around visa arrangements, eligibility for globally prestigious research funding and our participation in Erasmus+.
We are not posing these questions to generate fear, nor to forego our responsibility as a sector to prepare ourselves as best we can. These are questions of critical importance to the long-term health and reputation of our world-leading universities and to our ability to make the best of Brexit and what comes next. The results of the survey will inform our discussions with the government in the weeks to come.

If we are genuine in our commitment to put people at the heart of our sector, then we must do all that we can – both individually and collectively – to ensure that university is a fulfilling experience for all; one that has a long-lasting and positive impact that enables our students to thrive as they move forward in their careers and life.

Universities have made significant collective progress in addressing some of the broader societal challenges facing the UK and the wider world. And it is to these issues that I would now like to turn.

Student mental health has for several years been a priority issue for Universities UK – and a personal priority for me.
Last year’s conference coincided with the launch of our Suicide Safer Universities guidance.

We heard a powerful and deeply affecting testimony from James Murray, the father of Ben Murray, who urged us all to think about how we can join the dots within our institutions more effectively. How can we identify students experiencing poor mental health more easily? And how can we share information with trusted friends and family without breaking students’ trust or setting them back in their recovery?

These questions, and more, have been considered by Universities UK’s Information Sharing Task Group, which I chair, which brings together student representatives, bereaved parents, legal advisers, NHS staff and universities. I am delighted that this group will soon be publishing a consensus statement on information sharing with a nominated contact when there are serious concerns about a student’s wellbeing.
In recent years, I have watched the growing prevalence of hate crime in broader society with both horror and anger. The latest statistics for police-recorded hate crime showed a year-on-year increase of 17%. And race hate makes up a startling three-quarters of the total.

The university sector has already shown a strong commitment to tackling hate crime and harassment alongside gender-based violence. But we must increase our efforts to tackle race hate. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has undertaken an inquiry to examine racial harassment in the higher education sector and will report its findings soon. A core strand of UUK’s work this year will be responding to that report’s findings and recommendations and developing new guidance for the sector on addressing racial harassment.

As the charity Victim Support says: “Nobody should have to live with the fear and anxiety that hate crime causes.”

It will be a personal priority of mine to redouble the sector’s efforts to prevent and respond effectively to such damaging incidents.
And our responsibilities as university leaders also extend to ensuring our students remain safe in their social activities, particularly those relating to freshers’ week.

There has been a growing focus on initiations and hazing at universities following the tragic death of Ed Farmer in 2016 after an initiation-style bar crawl.

A cross-sector group convened by Universities UK will shortly publish guidance to help universities do more to identify and prevent problem initiations that result in a risk or occurrence of physical or mental harm. Excessive alcohol consumption is often a feature, but we must take care to acknowledge and respond to other contributory factors too.

I have said only a little so far about research and innovation. As the MadeAtUni campaign demonstrates, from the phones in our pockets to a revolutionary new blood test for rapid diagnosis of meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia, and the game-changing properties of graphene, UK university research is key to keeping our country at the forefront of innovation. And that means we need to be able to attract, to train, to retain and to recognise talented staff.
As chair of the Concordat Strategy Group, I have been closely involved with the review of the concordat to support the career development of researchers. A new concordat is published today, which we will hear more about this later this morning. It sets clear principles around environment and culture, employment conditions, and professional and career development which require a step change in approach.

The launch of the concordat provides an opportunity to show that we are committed to developing the pipeline of talented researchers needed in our universities and industry to develop the workforce needed to deliver the benefits of the government planned increase in investment in research and innovation to 2.4% of GDP.

And we must acknowledge our responsibility of looking after our staff - and that means effectively resolving the ongoing USS pensions dispute and working together to agree a long-term solution which is acceptable to all parties.
I want to end by saying something about Universities UK as an organisation, or rather the people who, together, make up Universities UK. While vice-chancellors are the nominated representatives of the universities we serve, the collective strength of UUK derives from engaging across the sector - from students to staff.

For UUK to maximise its impact and influence, it must make full use of the expertise of vice-chancellors, senior leaders, expert practitioners and our academic communities, to inform its work.

That's why I am so pleased to see so many representatives of wider senior leadership teams here today. And I am heartened that the broader sector engagement UUK routinely undertakes, whether that is using academics to inform our harassment work, students to shape our efforts on defining the value of higher education, communications and digital teams to help us bring the work of universities to a wider audience or immigration compliance and international recruitment teams to help us identify improvements to the visa system is both well received and well supported.
During my presidency, I would like to see this engagement broaden and deepen so that in carrying out its mission, UUK draws upon the wealth of expertise and talent within our member institutions.

As I start term of office as President, it is hard to predict with certainty what lies ahead over the next two years. Indeed, at the moment it is hard to predict what lies ahead over the next two days. But in this rapidly changing world, I am confident that the commitment of university staff and students, the energy and ideas of our researchers, and the common goal of doing more for this country and the public good stands us in excellent stead to weather any storms ahead.

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