

Speech by Professor Steve West CBE, President of Universities UK

Delivered at Universities UK Annual Conference 2021,
Thursday 9 September 2021 at Northumbria University,
Newcastle

“A mindset for our future”

Good morning – welcome to colleagues from universities and the sector, to our guests from the Department for Education and to the Education Secretary for joining us today.

This is, of course, my inaugural conference speech as President of Universities UK, having taken over from Professor Julia Buckingham last month. Julia’s term as President has seen the sector navigate not only the greatest peacetime challenge with the coronavirus pandemic but also the UK’s exit from the European Union. I would like to say an enormous thank you to Julia for her incredible work in representing the sector. She will be a hard act to follow. As I pick up the baton, I would like to thank you, for the trust you’ve placed in me. I will do my utmost to represent the sector with humility, passion and determination and will work with you all to deliver an ambitious, inspiring and sustainable future for our universities.

Today’s conference at Northumbria University marks the first time that most of us have gathered face-to-face in over a year and a half. And although some uncertainties persist, we meet at a time of renewed hope and determination.

Hope, that we are overcoming the challenges of the past 18 months and are emerging on the other side as the roll-out of the vaccination programme gathers pace across the UK and the world.

Hope, stemming from the optimism of a new academic year and a chance to support our students to build a brighter future as they follow their dreams.

And determination that our universities will continue to help drive the nation's social and economic recovery from Coronavirus as we work in partnership with businesses, communities, research partners, FE colleges, local, regional and national governments. As we drive ahead, we look to government to play its part in continuing to support us to deliver transformational change that benefits individuals, communities, society and the economy.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on all of our lives - on what we value, what we prioritise, what we do and how we do it.

We should reflect on this difficult period with pride. Pride in what we and our staff have achieved together across our teaching, enterprise, and civic engagement, pride in our world-class research which has helped us battle the virus and get our lives back; and pride in how we have supported our staff, students, and local communities through great uncertainty and, for some, personal tragedy.

Our world-class universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – of all shapes and sizes - stepped up in multiple different ways to work with our communities, government, the NHS, and businesses to meet head-on the challenges we all faced. We achieved major innovations in a time frame that we would never have thought possible before the pandemic. We supported our NHS and local communities with practical help, supplies, staff and students and we proudly stood shoulder to shoulder with each other. This has ignited a new sense of civic purpose and a determination to be more collaborative, innovative, creative, and challenging across all that we do. Our mindset was 'can do, must do and will do' and that will continue as we face the next phase of the pandemic and recovery.

We must build on the momentum and confidence of the last year-and-a-half. Coronavirus ripped up the playbook and gave us the chance to write a new and exciting chapter for

higher education. If ever there was a time for universities to fortify their impact through bold and brave leadership and action, now is that moment.

The government has made a commitment to build back better, and our universities in all four nations can help to do exactly that. But building back better and tackling inequalities requires focus and firm foundations. With the right government support, a stable funding environment and a long-term plan and freedom from interference and political side-shows deflecting us from our core mission, universities can and will help the UK build back, not just better, but faster, stronger, and greener too

UUK's #GettingResults campaign launched in May shows how universities are at the heart of economic and social recovery. Over the next five years universities will provide £11.6 billion worth of support and services to small enterprises, businesses, and not-for-profits, generate almost 22,000 new companies and charities, and undertake almost £22 billion of research collaboration. And we continue to ensure our public services have the supply of talented and committed individuals prepared for a career in public service. Over the next five years over 22,000 teachers will graduate from Scottish universities, over 2,000 new medics in Northern Ireland and over 10,000 nurses from Welsh universities.

Later this year, Universities UK will publish new independent research demonstrating the far-reaching impact of universities to their local economies, including how the sector supports more than 850,000 jobs in England. That is as many jobs as there are people in whole of Tyneside.

As large local employers, universities add huge value to their communities, which will be vital to the government's levelling up agenda. Where we are today, in the north east of England, universities employ 17,000 people directly and support more than 30,00 jobs in total through their activities. The economic footprint of the sector is increasing. In GDP terms, the sector has grown by around a quarter over five years to over £50 billion. This is more than twice the economic output of the city of Liverpool.

The coming months will bring critical policy decisions on reform of post-18 education alongside the next Comprehensive Spending Review. The stakes are high. The right policy decisions can ensure that anyone with the potential and ability to succeed at university can do so and deliver the supply of talented, highly educated, skilled people that business, public services, and communities need. But the wrong decisions may constrain, damage and set back the very towns, cities, and regions that the government most wants to level up, slowing our recovery and delaying our push towards an inclusive, prosperous global Britain.

We know the economic environment is challenging, but the country needs its universities more than ever to help drive our post-Covid recovery, to support our NHS and to create good, sustainable jobs in our local communities. Over time, global and national political priorities change. Governments, ministers, and vice-chancellors come and go, but our universities remain steadfast. Across the UK, universities act as anchor institutions, local powerhouses, convenors, collaborators, and accelerators of change. Across all four nations of the UK, our universities stand ready to turbocharge the recovery - fuelling inclusivity, growth, opportunity, mobility, and prosperity.

Now is not the time to shrink or underfund universities or colleges.

Now is not the time to crush aspiration and social mobility by reducing places for people to study at university. Cutting opportunity and reducing life chances is not the way forward. We must build on our rich education and training ecosystem and sector diversity to expand choice and accelerate the delivery of apprenticeships, degrees and accredited flexible life-long learning pathways that meet the needs of society and the economy.

We are therefore calling on government to seize the opportunity, to be visionary, brave and bold in the forthcoming CSR. Take this opportunity to harness the power of our universities and colleges through smart policy and targeted public investment. Think long-term aims, not short-term gains and create the sustainable conditions for innovation, jobs and new green industries that will shape our local and global futures.

We play a central role in delivering the government's ambition to position the UK as a global research superpower and to leverage private investment. This can only be achieved by doubling down on the commitment to invest 2.4% of GDP in R&D, and the dedicated and sustainable funding for the UK's participation in Horizon Europe which is a vital part of this.

We've made great strides in promoting innovation with the Knowledge Exchange Concordat and HEIF funding, helping us work even more closely and productively with businesses and industry. And we can do more to help government to deliver the ambitions set out in their Innovation Strategy through targeted investments that bring together public and private investment. Universities across the nations of the UK will need to be central to the Shared Prosperity Fund as we collaborate to level-up and build back better.

The past 18 months have been turbulent for us all. Universities are eager to welcome all staff and students back, to see vibrant learning communities in real life again. We hope we are heading for calmer waters, but the public health situation remains unpredictable; the virus remains with us and is changing too, so we must be ready to adapt depending on where the pandemic takes us next.

As our students and staff return, we pledge to them that we are doing all we can to give them the university and life experiences they want and deserve. Last year, the exceptional efforts of our staff ensured that our teaching and learning outcomes continued to be met. But our students undoubtedly missed the many opportunities that a 'normal university' experience provides - to socialise, volunteer, and enjoy extra-curricular activities. They – and we - missed face-to-face social interactions, the buzz of an academic community with face-to face on-campus contact. This year we must redouble our commitment to supporting our students not only to progress academically but to grow as individuals and fully enjoy their university experience. It is a transformative period of their lives and we owe it to them to deliver the best opportunities we can.

Staff and student safety and the wider public health considerations remain the driving force behind our individual and collective approaches. Parents, students, and governments can be

assured that universities are ready: we're strongly encouraging students to get vaccinated without delay and we're taking our responsibility to provide safe and welcoming campuses extremely seriously.

We are making it as easy and convenient as possible for students to get vaccinated and tested – vaccine buses and pop-up clinics will be a feature at the start of term; we're working closely with our local NHS and public health partners to plan and prepare. And our leadership teams are making the decisions that are right for their location and their circumstances about a range of other safety measures and behaviours. We are ready to adapt and respond to the scientific evidence as we and our public health colleagues continue to put the health and safety of staff and students first.

Universities will be delivering as much teaching, learning, support, and activities in person across our campuses as we can. But, alongside this we will continue to harness the benefits of technological advances where this enhances the overall student experience and where our students tell us this is what they want. To politicians and commentators who have asked "Why not everything in person?". Well, I respectfully point out that that the move to some teaching, learning and assessment online was already happening pre-Covid because students have been clear that digital developments can enhance their learning and outcomes. The pandemic merely accelerated the pace of change as we innovated and harnessed the potential of technologies. In education – as in all other areas of our lives – not least in my own healthcare practice – we must not simply revert to how things were before. For the sake of our students and our staff, we must learn from our experiences and find the right blend for the future. We must challenge and co-create approaches that foster innovation. Our campuses must be used to engage, inspire and build confidence and our interactions with students must cultivate curiosity and allow exploration of knowledge, skills and attributes that will serve them as future ready graduates and confident life-long learners.

Higher education is a transformative experience. As the first person in my family to go to college and university, it changed my life. I was destined to join the family business as a

plumber, not study and practice Podiatric Medicine, and then ultimately lead a university. And so my story reaffirmed my strong belief that success is not always linear and education should not be time limited. Proposed government reforms - such as the lifelong loan entitlement - offer a fantastic opportunity for the sector to innovate, collaborate and diversify, reaching out to communities who may never have considered higher education as an option. Flexible, part-time study alongside the workplace played a significant role in my own career - and it can play a significant role in the lives of millions more. Universities UK is committed to working with the government to help design and develop the lifelong loan entitlement to ensure it provides more opportunities for more people to benefit from the life-changing experience that a university education can offer.

The country's future skills needs are complex and diverse, and to meet this challenge, universities will need to draw on the strength and diversity of the entire education system. This means an offer to learners that encompasses modular flexible delivery through collaboration across HE, FE, and employers.

Higher education institutions are already implementing changes to best meet the needs of future learners, their regions, and business communities . But we need government support to help us accelerate this. We are calling on government to support wide-ranging and sector-led transformative change through the implementation of a flexible transformation fund. This is not a subsidy or a handout, but a desire to work with government and businesses to bring about real change and unlock opportunities such as those presented by the lifelong loan entitlement.

We should learn from Singapore, Australia, America as we look to collaborate with them to offer a global network able to recognise and accredit learning and skills through micro-credentialing and transferable learning-passports that can be used by employers and individuals to document skills, knowledge, attributes and qualifications gained over a lifetime.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we must ensure that the sector grows the scale and scope of its international activities and remains a study destination of choice. Brexit altered the balance of our international relationships and the pandemic created new challenges, but new research from UUKi shows the appetite from international scholars to study at UK institutions remains high – and with UK government support we can increase our lead on Australia and start nipping at America’s heels. We will hear more later about the economic benefits international students bring to the UK economy. With a partnership deal in place with the EU and an ambitious cross-Government International Education Strategy to fulfil, we have the foundations in place to help Government achieve its aspirations for Global Britain. Our shared priority must be to ensure that progress does not stall.

The international profile and engagement of our universities is a significant strategic asset to the UK and a critical to enhancing the country’s global standing. But internationalisation must be safe, secure, and sustainable – and UUK’s guidelines and ongoing work in this area are helping safeguard universities against security-related risks that can result from international collaborations.

With all these challenges, there has never been a more critical period for effective leadership than now. We have steered our universities through a tremendous period of change. We have learned a huge amount about ourselves, our universities, and our partnerships.

Our experiences during Covid-19 have shown that compassionate, authentic, values-led, agile leadership has been essential as we have engaged with complex strategic and operational dimensions alongside human factors and uncertainties.

Higher education must continue to lead the way with our commitment to delivering mentally healthy universities. We must think and act strategically and holistically and work hard to enhance the mental health, wellbeing and emotional intelligence of ourselves, our staff, and our students. The benefits are clear: productivity, innovation, creativity, performance, and fulfilment all flourish when we work collaboratively and inclusively across

our universities. We do better both as individuals and organisations when we get this right and when our mental health and wellbeing is supported.

We have had to dig deep over the past 18 months to guide and sustain our institutions. I hope that in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our staff, students and loved ones we have not lost sight of the need to look after our own health and wellbeing.

And we know the pandemic has had a profound impact on young people. Students continue to report lower levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing than the wider population. Many school and college leavers arriving at our universities over the coming months will have experienced disruption, digital poverty, social isolation, and personal loss during the pandemic.

This underlines the importance of intensifying our efforts to provide the best possible support we can for our students as we adapt to living with Covid and deal with the aftermath of the pandemic. And we must apply the same principle to our staff too.

Scottish university principals and their student union leaders this week committed publicly to making the mental health and wellbeing of new and returning students a priority. I am pleased to say that across all four nations we have made significant progress to-date on supporting positive mental health and wellbeing in our institutions. But let's not be complacent, there is significant work still to be done. Our ambition must be for all universities to prioritise and embed the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students across all we do. There are excellent frameworks and toolkits in place to help us. But they don't matter if we, as leaders, don't engage and commit to leading the transformational change required. Recent work has examined the approaches taken by 12 vice-chancellors and their senior teams. The outcomes of that work will be shared soon and will be critical to our future success.

As leaders, we must do all we can to protect and enhance the quality and value of what we provide for our students and collectively address legitimate questions that threaten to

undermine public and political confidence. This includes making further progress in tackling unexplained grade inflation and attainment gaps, as well as working with government to reform the admissions system to ensure it is fair, transparent and applicant focused, and taking a more transparent and consistent approach to maintaining high-value and high-quality sustainable courses.

We must also continue to forge ahead with clear leadership and impactful solutions on other areas which remain a concern to our staff and students, such as tackling harassment and hate crime including racial harassment.

Universities are central to debating society's biggest challenges. Students come to university to explore a subject they are passionate about, to learn new things, to expand their minds, to challenge themselves and their opinions, and to question the views of others. This freedom is something that I am personally determined to uphold. The free exchange of ideas drives innovation, discovery, and social progress, provides students with a critical mindset, and ensures that universities play a central role in national debates and wider society – even when it is uncomfortable for some.

That is why universities work hard to create the right conditions to protect and promote free speech and academic freedom and to fulfill the free speech requirements already placed upon them.

We will use the next stages of the Higher Education (Free Speech) Bill as an opportunity to re-state our full and firm commitment to freedom of speech. And we will work with government, our staff and students and the public to deliver.

Alongside the devastation of the pandemic, we have also witnessed the increasing threats posed by climate change. In two months, the UK will host COP26 and UUK will be working with members to showcase the collective contribution of UK universities to tackling the climate emergency.

Current and future generations depend on us to solve this global challenge. Universities in all four nations of the UK, working with governments across the world, will play a significant role in setting the right direction for change.

We are embedding climate literacy into our curricula and undertaking research and innovation to adapt our behaviours and innovate through research and technology to reduce climate risk. But there is more we can and must do. UUK's Climate Task and Finish Group has identified actions that we should all be committing to: from setting targets for scope 1 and 2 emission reductions which are at least as stretching as those set by government, to ensuring there is greater visibility to our sustainability strategies. As a sector we can - and must - step up our efforts to tackle this global challenge; future generations, are depending on us to do all we can to save our planet.

Crucially Government must play its role too by ensuring funding policies for teaching and research support the higher education sector's ambitions on sustainability, by addressing barriers to universities accessing the public sector decarbonisation scheme and by avoiding further damaging cuts to ODA funding which constrain the power of universities to combat the world's most pressing sustainability challenges.

So, the coming years will not be easy for us. Our purpose, our values and our impact will continue to be challenged and questioned. We will need to fight hard for our staff and our students to protect the continuing power of UK higher education to transform lives. We will need to be at our most engaging, persuasive, proactive, and collaborative. We should be proud in celebrating our sector's achievements and we should not hesitate to call out prejudice and misinformation where we see it. Our engagement with the public, business, press and our wider community partners must be clear, accountable, inspiring, and unambiguous and their voices must be encouraged to join ours.

There is great strength in our collectivism and in our shared missions to provide higher education that transforms lives, enriches communities, and solves global challenges. Together we are strong. We have a rich and diverse sector that is world leading and with

focus, government support and encouragement we can be stronger still and help lead the country's recovery from Coronavirus. Now is the time for transformational change, now is the time to stand together and now is the time to be bold as we create a more inclusive, sustainable and better future for all.

Thank you.