

Speech

The student journey – from teenage to middle-age

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| From: | Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and Jo Johnson MP |
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Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson calls on universities to seize the opportunity to give students more choice and better quality teaching.



Thank you to Aldwyn Cooper and Regents University for hosting the event today. And thank you to Nick (Hillman) and everyone at Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) for inviting me to speak at this year's conference.

Within the world of academia, you can find an expert on anything from anthropology to zoology, but those in higher education (HE) who study their own sector are a rare and important breed.

I'm sure I'm not the only person in this room who looks forward to

those little blue A5 pamphlets landing on my desk.

So I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to HEPI's work this year and in particular those behind this year's Student Academic Experience Survey, which has received lots of coverage today.

Today, I plan to reflect on your theme (The Student Journey: from teenage to middle age) and how it fits with the [white paper](#) and [bill](#) which is now before Parliament.

It's a theme that chimes well with our plans for higher education, for 2 reasons:

Firstly, because everything we set out in our [white paper](#) is about ensuring students get the support they need throughout their journey – from the information available to them when they are applying, right the way through to their progression into the jobs market.

And secondly, because in a flexible and competitive labour market, we must continue to ensure there are opportunities to gain new qualifications at all stages of life. That's a principle that underpins the new part-time and post-graduate support we're introducing. I'll say a bit more about that later.

Higher Education and Research Bill

First, the [white paper](#) and [bill](#).

From the 600 responses we had to the [green paper](#), to the submissions to [Lord Stern's Research Excellence Framework \(REF\) review](#), through to the input we are seeking to the [Teaching Excellence Framework \(TEF\) technical consultation](#), and all the time and effort that will feed in to the Parliamentary process – we want you to continue to help us shape these plans.

We are now at the start of the legislative process.

The [Higher Education and Research Bill](#) introduced in the Commons last month responds to a recognition that the

regulatory environment needs to reflect the realities of the changes since the 1992 Act, a quarter of a century ago.

There is a lot of catching up to do, but the economic case for a diverse and widely accessible higher education sector is as strong as ever.

Employers need the graduate-level skills, as much as our national and regional economies look to the university sector to boost productivity and help to create jobs. To quote the University Alliance's press release last week, higher education institutions are the "hub and spoke in UK innovation".

We are privileged to have such a successful higher education sector. Our universities top the league tables for research. The sector is the driving force behind our successful knowledge economy, and underpins many of the cultural and creative forces that put the Great in Great Britain.

We have made real progress in ensuring more people are able to benefit from access to our world-class higher education sector. The participation rate among young students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds has reached record levels – up from 13.6% in 2009 to 18.5% last year.

But, as we set out in our [white paper](#), there are steps we must take to ensure our higher education system is fulfilling its potential both as a driver of productivity and an engine of social mobility. Among the questions we cannot afford to ignore and are seeking to address are:

- is higher education as accessible as it could be?
- do students have enough information and choice?
- are courses sufficiently flexible in length and teaching methods?
- does the teaching consistently meet students' expectations?
- does the manner of regulation reflect the realities of the sector?
- what more can we do to ensure all students get the best outcomes, irrespective of backgrounds?
- are we making the most of our £6 billion annual investment in

research and innovation?

These are not new questions, but they are ones we now have the opportunity to address.

This year's Student Academic Experience Survey confirms some recent trends:

- a declining proportion of students are very satisfied with their course – from 37% in 2013 to 27% in 2016
- 18% of students feel they have enough information on how their fees are spent (unchanged from 2015)
- 1 in 3 (33%) say that with hindsight they would have chosen a different course

Overall, students' perception of value for money continues to fall. Just 37% of respondents feeling they receive good value for money compared to 40% in 2015, and 53% in 2012.

Student choice

As students now expect to meet more of the costs of their education through their future earnings, they rightly have a sharper eye for value, and higher expectations of quality.

So we have to ask ourselves what steps can be taken to make the whole 'student journey' even better.

At the start of the journey, there is the information and the choices available to students as they prepare their applications.

And as we set out in the [white paper](#), we want students to be able to choose from a wider range of universities.

That's why the [bill](#) will level the playing field for high quality new entrants, making it simpler for innovative and specialist providers to set up, award degrees, drive-up quality, secure university status, and give applicants more choice about where and how to study.

Currently, high-quality new entrants are held back by rules that

dictate that they must secure validation from an existing university before they can get up and running. This has been recognised as an inherently anti-competitive situation by the [Competition and Markets Authority](#) – one that potentially puts high-quality providers off and limits the choice and innovation that students deserve.

This year marks 40 years since the University of Buckingham, Britain's first 'private' university, was formally opened to 65 students. 98% of its students walk straight into a job. This is an example of what can be achieved by liberalising our higher education system.

Recently, we have seen providers with excellent reputations in their specialist field entering the sector and offering something distinctive to students.

Sotheby's Institute of Art, dealing in the intersection between art and commerce; Pearson College, where students can gain important business skills. And BPP, where you can complete a degree over 2 years, entering the workforce much more quickly.

And of course Regent's University, where we are today, has gradually expanded over time and is now a successful multi-disciplinary institution.

But the process for high-quality new universities is not as smooth or as swift as it could be.

Take Suffolk, one of the few counties in the country to lack its 'own' university. University Campus Suffolk has been in business since 2007. It had to wait until very recently to get its own degree awarding powers. And last month, almost a decade later, we were able to give it the green light to apply for university title.

Hereford is another HE 'cold spot', where there is the prospect of a real step-change in HE provision, through the 'new model in technology and engineering'. This has the potential to fill a national skills gap as well as meeting the needs of local students.

As these examples show, new higher education provision can

offer diverse and innovative programmes of study, following in the footsteps of Ashridge, for example, who have recently launched their Creative MBA, backed by Lord Puttnam. This creative course has the potential to train the Oscar-winners of the future.

There will be those who worry about new universities challenging the established sector. And we have heard these concerns before.

Two of our most successful universities, University College London and King's College London, were dismissed as 'cockney' universities in the 1820s.

We heard it again when the great civic red brick universities emerged later in the nineteenth century, and the polytechnics in the 1990s. Over-education; a reduction in quality; a strain on the public purse.

Indeed, at the turn of the 20th century, some (Oxford) students apparently jeered: "He gets a degree in making jam / at Liverpool and Birmingham". Journalists asked: "What advantages can a Reading Degree confer, unless a "D.B." (Doctor of Biscuits) is established..."

How wrong they were.

And of course many opposed the conversion of the polytechnics in the 1990s.

Students deserve the choice that new universities can offer. They deserve choice, and they also deserve quality. That is why the government will make it easier for new universities to enter the sector, and it's why the quality bar for new entrants will remain high, reflecting the highest standards we expect of English higher education.

Through the Office for Students (OfS), we will ensure there is a level playing field for those seeking degree awarding powers and university title.

Poor quality or financially unsustainable providers at any level will

not be able to enter, and all providers will need to continue to meet financial sustainability, management, and corporate governance requirements.

We are establishing the Office for Students with the tools it needs to regulate in a smarter, risk-based way, at arm's length from government, and maintaining institutional autonomy. This more risk-based approach means it will be able to:

- focus on areas where risks are high and regulation is needed
- reduce burdens on the best performing institutions
- ensure that the way we regulate reflects the shape of the sector and the way it's funded

Social mobility

The student journey can only be regarded as a success if it is truly open to anyone, from any background, to take part.

That's why the other important feature of the Office for Students is the way it will have access and participation mainstreamed in everything it does.

The current powers of the Director for Fair Access will be incorporated into the OfS. We will create a nominated executive member of the OfS board, the Director for Fair Access and Participation.

And we will go further than before. The new OfS will have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity across the whole lifecycle for disadvantaged students, not just access, alongside its duty to promote choice. The OfS will have new powers not just to promote 'access' in these agreements but to ask universities to focus on 'access and participation'.

So new 'access and participation plans' will look beyond just the point of entry to ensure that universities are doing all they can to support the participation of students throughout their courses, helping to tackle drop-out rates and support disadvantaged students into employment.

We're underpinning this with more information than ever before to shine a spotlight on the institutions that are really playing their part, and those that need to do more.

That's why the new transparency duty included in the [bill](#) is so important.

We want students to make informed choices between institutions and courses – and this is especially important for those from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds, who may not be able to rely on their parents or others to guide their decisions.

Under the proposed transparency duty, all universities (approved providers) will be required to publish data on application and offer rates broken down by gender, ethnicity, and disadvantage from 2018.

We are already making progress, and I'm pleased that UCAS is today publishing data from around 100 universities on a voluntary basis. For the first time, we are able to compare and contrast offer rates between institutions.

This is something the Prime Minister called for in January and it's heartening to see the sector respond constructively. We have been calling on the higher education sector to publish much more information about their admissions process, and I welcome these first voluntary steps by those who have taken part.

This is a good start. But this is only a voluntary data release, and there are more than a hundred institutions that were not covered. That's why we are legislating to introduce a new transparency duty to cover all institutions.

Our legislation will ensure that all providers designated for the purposes of student support, whether they use UCAS or not, must publish this information. And the bill will secure the availability of this information in the future.

Our planned duty will potentially cover 400 or so institutions. And it will ensure that there are clear requirements on all universities

to release more information about their admissions process, with real incentives on all institutions to go further and faster to promote social mobility.

Student journeys

The choices we want to make available to students are not just about where to study but how and when to study as well.

Lifelong learning is an essential element of today's labour market. If we want to continue to prosper as a great knowledge economy, we need to ensure that there are viable opportunities for people to gain qualifications in later life.

That is why we've introduced more financial support for part-time learners than ever before. We have introduced part-time tuition fee loans. Now we're introducing maintenance loans too – meaning we have utterly transformed the part-time funding landscape during this Parliament. And we've removed the equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQ) restriction on support for second degrees in STEM subjects.

And we are, for the first time, introducing student finance for postgraduate study – with the first Master's loans available this autumn.

But the choice of how and when to study must go further.

The future of our higher education system lies not just in spreading existing best practice, but also in the development of innovative delivery methods – such as degree apprenticeships, accelerated degrees, and the ability to accumulate credit and switch course.

So we have launched a [call for evidence to understand student demand for switching degrees and 2-year programmes](#) – and also to learn about the barriers. We want the whole sector to feed in views – to tell us what is working well, and to feed in ideas to make more flexible approaches to learning a reality.

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

Another area we want the sector to work with us on is the formation of UK Research and Innovation.

The UK has an unparalleled reputation for the excellence of its research and for a business environment that encourages innovation. And the government has taken the decision to protect the science budget at a time of difficult spending decisions. But being world-class is not just about investment. It's also about building collaborations across disciplines and between countries; finding new applications for technology; seizing commercial opportunities, and being able to respond swiftly to threats and challenges.

Our research and innovation structures have evolved over many decades and they have many strengths but [Sir Paul Nurse recognised the need to 'support the research councils to collectively make up more than the sum of their parts'](#).

We share his vision to strengthen strategic thinking, reduce complexity and deal more effectively with multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research.

As the bill makes clear, in setting up UKRI, we are also preserving our existing strengths. That includes:

- preserving the autonomy and identity of the research councils and Innovate UK, so they can continue to serve their distinct communities
- maintaining separate budgets for each part of UKRI
- creating the first ever legal basis for the dual support system in England, with a requirement on us as ministers to have regard to the balance of spending between the 2 funding streams

This is legislation to enshrine in statute the dual support system – and the quality-related (QR) block grant to institutions – that has simply never existed before.

The bill also includes provisions to ensure joint working, cooperation and data sharing across all areas of shared interest

between the OfS and UKRI, including being able to take a strategic view across academic and research careers.

Crucially, we are taking steps to bring teaching and research closer together. I want the REF and the TEF to be mutually reinforcing. We will ask institutions to consider how they promote research-led teaching in their TEF submissions; and I have also asked Lord Stern, as part of his review of the REF, to consider the impact of excellent teaching.

The opportunity here is to super-charge everything that is great about our universities and research base – protecting the funding and the autonomy that has served us so well, while putting in place the provisions that enable us to act strategically, and lead the world in our response to major challenges.

Conclusion

Our proposals are the latest in a long line that aim to extend the benefits of higher education to more people and enhance the global reputation of one of our greatest national assets – our universities.

And today's conference is a reminder about why we are doing this. The motivation is clear: to provide the opportunities for students from all backgrounds, as they progress 'from teenage to middle age' and beyond – from school into the wider workforce, or from their undergraduate course into post-graduate career in our research base, and with many other variations of that well-trodden path in between.

Whichever path a student chooses, their time at university is essential – for their own progress, and that of our country.

We want our universities to continue to innovate, to work more closely with employers in designing their courses and to find faster routes into the workplace, such as through more 2-year degrees. The message from this HEPI survey is clear, which is why our universities which are rightly recognised as world-class, must also seize this opportunity to ensure they are delivering

real value to their students.

We want you to continue to engage with us as we move forward with our plans.

Please take a look at our [call for evidence on course switching and accelerated degrees](#), and respond to the [TEF technical consultation](#).

And have a great conference today. I'm looking forward to reading many more HEPI pamphlets, and to continuing the important discussion about the nature of the 'student journey'.

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Part of:

Access to higher education

Higher education participation

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