

Bristol Grammar School HE Conference - 25 June 2010

1. Thank you for inviting me to speak today, and for giving me the privilege of opening your conference on higher education. I know it will be a very valuable day for you all as you make important decisions about your future. It is fantastic to see so many of you here, each with your own hopes, ambitions, and strong potential.

I'm going to spend this opening session speaking to you about the importance of higher education and about journeys: 1) the direction of higher education, 2) UWE's journey, and 3) personal journeys – my own journey through higher education, potentially some of your pathways, and those of some of our alumni.

I have called my presentation Higher Education: Transforming Lives, because that is what higher education does, that is its reason for being, and that is why it has such an important role in society, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

- 2.1 So, some facts and figures about higher education. Well, there are currently 166 higher education institutions in the sector, including 116 universities. This presents you with a huge range of choices. There is much diversity in the sector, and part of today will be about discovering what sort of institution is right for you. There are those that have a strong research focus, those that focus on the employability skills of their graduates and partnerships with business, there are those that have a strong reputation for sports, there are those that focus on providing opportunities and support for students from low-participation neighbourhoods who may be the first person in their family to go to University, and there are those that combine these and a variety of other defining features. The UK has an incredibly strong and diverse sector where you have the opportunity to find what suits you, and what institution or course will really help you to fulfil your ambitions.
- 2.2 There are some 2.4 million students enrolled in universities and colleges in the UK and the participation rate for 17-30 year olds has increased to 45%. I know you will be well aware of the competition for places and I'm sure the knowledge that you gain today will really help you to make the right choices and to seize on the opportunities available.
- 2.3 In the UK higher education sector there are some 251,300 international students, and 117,660 students from the European Union. Student populations are becoming increasingly diverse, which provides an extremely rich environment in which to learn, share different perspectives, and challenge each others' understandings. University is about being open to new ideas, challenging the boundaries of knowledge, and seeing how new ideas can shape the world around us.
- 2.4 It is also about enhancing the job prospects of graduates. It is clearly a very challenging time economically – but it is important to remember that where there is challenge there is always opportunity. The most recent figures show that the average graduate salary stands at £25,000, and over a lifetime, the average graduate premium – the amount extra that a graduate on average earns over a non-graduate – stands at £100,000. So, even in difficult economic times there are still financial, in addition to personal development benefits to a higher education experience. This will of course vary depending on subject area – but in any area, as mentioned before, there are always opportunities to look out for and seize upon.
- 3.1 Higher education not only has a direct impact on the students that engage with these learning experiences, it also has a huge impact on our national economy. UK higher education generates over £59bn of output for the UK economy, including export earnings amounting to £5.3bn. Higher education produces about 2.3% of national GDP – more than is generated by the advertising or pharmaceutical industries.
- 3.2 Universities also often create 'spin-out' companies, to translate innovative ideas into market opportunities. These are the ideas of both staff and students. At universities like UWE that place a strong emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship, this is certainly an area where you can draw on a large range of support, from the development of business plans, to business incubation space to help you take your ideas to market. Universities collectively have established just under 1,000 'spin-out' companies, employing about 14,000 people, with a combined turnover of £1.1bn.
- 3.3 95% of higher education institutions have facility usage arrangements with local sports clubs, providing sports facilities for local communities - supporting both healthy living and community engagement. At UWE we certainly have a strong sense of place and location. Being engaged with our local communities is an important part of what we stand for as a University.
- 3.4 This also involves organising and providing public lectures on a range of topics – for example at UWE we run a series of lectures where key leaders from industry come and share their insights, in an informal setting, with our students, staff and members of our community. University public lectures have attracted in total, some 750,000 attendees in one year alone. These and other activities demonstrate that the knowledge development and exchange that takes place in universities is most certainly not restricted to its

staff and students. Universities are part of their communities – this is to a greater or lesser extent across the sector. I encourage each of you to engage with these sorts of opportunities that are on offer in Bristol throughout the year, at both UWE and Bristol University.


- 3.5 Universities also play a strong role in their communities through staff and student volunteering. Some 67,000 students volunteer with a charity, and in 2008/09 UWE students dedicated 28,000 hours of their time to volunteering – from helping out in local schools (raising aspirations and providing support where required), to taking part in a big beach clean at Weston-super-Mare. There are a whole range of volunteering opportunities on offer through universities, locally and internationally, and this is certainly one way in which you can make a positive difference, really enhance your learning experience, and of course add to your CV upon graduation.
- 4.1 The government's priorities as the sector moves forward fall into three main areas 1) graduate skills and employability – ensuring that graduates develop and are aware of their development of core competencies such as working together, communicating and influencing, analysing and using evidence, problem-solving, leadership and development, planning and managing resources, and project management. It also means providing students with the opportunity to take part in some form of work placement. Universities have engaged with this agenda to a greater or lesser degree – and this will be apparent in the prospectuses that you will be looking through. For some of you this will be more important than it will be for others. At UWE this agenda is a strong priority – and we have invested in a graduate development programme to support the development of these skills alongside our students' core study. We are also a leading University in providing government backed internships to enhance the prospects of our graduates. We believe in working in partnership with our students and their potential future employers to the benefit of both parties and society as a whole.
- 4.2 The government are also quite rightly emphasising the importance of quality and the student experience, particularly at a time when graduates are likely to be expected to make a higher financial contribution to the costs of their university education, and when there are more and more international and private providers in the market. Again, this is something that is at the top of our agenda at UWE.
- 4.3 As is social mobility and ensuring that opportunities are available to all who can benefit. At UWE we see this as part of our role in the community – reaching the hard to reach. UWE and others do this through, for example, summer schools, visiting schools and arranging visits to our campuses, mentoring students and staff serving as school governors. UWE is Xcel Widening Participation Institution of the Year and we are very proud of this achievement. Transforming lives, is after all the core purpose of universities – whatever way in which they can best deliver this.

These are priorities that the government has set, and which universities are delivering. The degree to which institutions focus on these priorities will vary across the sector.

So higher education is on a journey. It has developed significantly over the years – not least through the expansion in numbers. One way to illustrate this is to share with you some picture of UWE's journey.

5. Here is a picture of our Frenchay campus as it was in 1982. A relatively modest size, and with large expanses of green space around it. Significantly less traffic too! The MoD site at Filton was also yet to be built.
6. Travelling on to 2008 and we see a much larger campus with accommodation for nearly 2,000 students on campus in our student village, in the middle to bottom right hand corner.
7. We, along with other universities, are developing still, to ensure that we keep up to speed with the learning environment that you and other aspiring students are looking for. Key principles for us in this development are flexible learning spaces, an environmentally sustainable and healthy environment, and an innovative space encouraging partnership with local businesses and the community.
8. I briefly touched upon the international aspects of higher education earlier in terms of student numbers in the UK. Higher education is becoming increasingly global. There are significant opportunities to spend time learning about cultures from around the globe, either on campus or through study abroad opportunities. At UWE there are opportunities in places from Virginia to Vietnam – in particular we have developed strong partnerships with institutions in South East Asia. This picture is from our first convocation, or graduation ceremony in Malaysia. Universities are increasingly international and this provides you with a whole host of exciting opportunities to really engage with the global knowledge economy of which we are a part.

So, I've talked so far about the journey universities are on and the diversity in the sector, as well as sharing with you a bit about UWE's journey. I now want to share with you a bit about my own personal journey.



9. My journey commences at a comprehensive school and sixth form college – where it was fair to say I was described as an average student. I then went on to study chiropody – keeping feet in a healthy condition. In my time studying chiropody I was particularly inspired by one senior lecturer. There is always one lecturer or teacher that really speaks to you and helps you to develop a passion for a subject. I'm sure you each have teachers in this school that have had a similar affect on you – really creating a desire to learn. I then went on to study for a BSc in Podiatry – the first BSc in the subject in the UK. After that I went on to carry out research for a doctorate at Kings College London, whilst also being involved in professional practice. I went on from this to join the academic profession, first as lecturer, then senior lecturer, Associate Dean, Dean, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and now Vice-Chancellor. I certainly didn't end up where I expected – but I think that is the fantastic thing about life and careers – they take you on paths you don't necessarily expect and present opportunities for you to take and through which you can make a real difference.

Ultimately my experiences have taught me to seize on opportunities, and that fundamentally a university experience is about changing lives and fulfilling potential – again going back to the title of my talk.


So, what about your journey? You are obviously at a very important stage in your decision making. Some of you will have a better idea than others about what to expect from higher education.

10. Speaking from a UWE perspective – I know one thing you can expect is a very big welcome when you arrive. The first few days and weeks of a new environment can be very unsettling – or they can be a taste of long desired freedom! Whatever way you look at things, there will be a range of activities in the early days and weeks and my advice to you is to engage with these as you see fit. At UWE we have well over 700 student representatives in place across the University, to listen to our students and hear their perspectives on the provision that we provide.

There are a huge range of ways to get involved in a University, should this be the route for you. I advise that you get involved and really shape the environment that you are in.

11. This slide pictures a range of ways to do this, based at UWE – through sports clubs and societies, through music and drama, through fundraising activities, or activities to raise awareness of health and well-being – such as our life-size table football or sumo wrestling. There really is something for everyone, and activities beyond your subject discipline really do enhance your overall learning experience, development, and of course your CV. I encourage you all to get involved with your universities through their students' unions and student representation opportunities.
12. There are also significant opportunities for entrepreneurship and business development. This slide shows some pictures from our graduate shows, where students have the opportunity to showcase their product designs. Here we have a bee house prototype, and Heximotional – an insect like robot, in the top right, by Robert Stephenson. The slide also refers to our annual BizIdea competition, where we support the development of business ideas across a range of categories. In the bottom right is a picture of James Dunlop and his successful myhab, which he came up with as a student at UWE – introducing a new environmentally friendly and hassle free camping service targeted at music festivals.
13. Your pathway may take you down an engineering and technology route, engaging with innovations in robotics, or ground breaking projects such as the Bloodhound SSC attempt to achieve a land-speed record of 1000mph. At UWE we are very proud of our involvement in the development of the Bloodhound SSC, as the leading University in this project, and our students have had the opportunity to contribute to this project, working with Andy Green, the driver, on the cock pit design, and sharing insights with Lord Drayson, the former Science Minister.

You have the opportunity to get involved in these and other cutting edge technologies.

14. Graduate opportunities are clearly available in a range of areas. This slide shows you some of the work of our architecture students, which they get to showcase in our subject specific graduate shows.
15. The creative arts and pervasive media are also particularly strong in Bristol, which may turn out to be your desired pathway. Again, this slide includes a range of pictures of the work of our students, in animation – where we work with partners such as Aardman animation; in performance arts in the top right – performing in the Wedding Singer; in graphic design; and in fashion – where UWE students presented as part of London Fashion Week.
16. There are also significant graduate opportunities in health care – and this slide shows some of our students at work.
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17. And there are opportunities in science, across a range of disciplines, for example, forensics and crime scene analysis.

This is only a taster of the opportunities and future pathways available to you through higher education.

In my final section I am just going to briefly share with you some of the journeys of our graduates and alumni.

UWE graduates, like those from other universities, go on to achieve great things, from sporting achievements to political achievements. The examples I have chosen will hopefully illustrate a number of pathways.

18. So, firstly, we have Kevin Watkins, a graduate from our MEng Electronic Engineering Programme who is now on a graduate fast track development programme at the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS).

Luke Jeffers who completed a post-graduate diploma in European Business Administration, and went on to set up his own educational consultancy and has retired at 40 having sold his company at a multi-million pound price.

There are also pathways such as that taken by Kate Sleeth, who graduated in applied biochemistry and molecular biology, who is now a postdoctoral researcher in Oxford.

19. Our alumni also include Deepa Vithlani who studied physiotherapy with us and has gone on to achieve her ambitions to become a physiotherapist.

Tom Shurville studied Business Studies with UWE and has gone on to set up his own very successful web marketing business.

And, from the humanities, Liz Elkington has gone on to become a scriptwriter, producer and director for British Sky Broadcasting.

There are so many opportunities available to you as the potential graduates of the future.

20. Through higher education you have the opportunity to develop a deep subject knowledge, to significantly enhance your personal and perhaps professional development. You have the opportunity to develop your core competencies through the development opportunities offered by universities, and through work placements and internships. You have the opportunity to develop your graduate prospects through a range of university experiences, and you have the opportunity to really engage with what it means to be a global citizen today and in the future.

Higher education is about transforming lives so that you can change the world. You have extremely exciting opportunities in front of you and I wish each of you all the best as you shape your future pathways, and importantly, you shape society and the world around us. Thank you, good luck, and enjoy your day.

