

GMT interview

Proud of British higher education

The David Willetts interview

Aphrodite Papadatou takes us to BIS for an insight into the Minister of Universities and Science's take on the debates about preparation for entry into higher education and the socio-economic role of the sector. The candid, and at times personal interview covers the three main areas presently under much contestation: the initiative to make information about HEIs publicly available, how schools and colleges prepare pupils for HE, and the connection between HE and the UK's skills growth agenda.¹

AP: The production of Key Information Sets (KIS) will make information about HE more explicit than ever before; can you tell us what informed your own decision to enter HE?

DW: Well, I entered HE deep in the mists of time in 1974! I was at grammar school in Birmingham and, as in all academic schools, going to university was the thing to do. Of course things have changed since then. In some places it still is a case of 'jumbo jetting' off the runway, yet in other places an individual pupil's decision to enter HE is a more unusual one. These are the areas where we need to help. But on a personal level, I was in an academic school where the assumption was made that most pupils would go to university.

AP: How will KIS help improve these areas?

DW: In retrospect I didn't have much information – I didn't know what I was doing or why I was doing it. Nowadays young people expect much more information. This is especially the case when new anxieties come into play, questions such as, 'will this help me get a well paid job?', 'how often will I see a tutor, or an academic?' We hope that they will get the key information they want in this new accessible format. In fact the design of the 17 key information

sets is driven by student demand. It is driven by investigation into the most frequently asked questions that students put forward. They are not chosen by a committee, but are 17 questions identified as students' top queries about going to university. As such they will be answered from multiple perspectives – from employment prospects through to student satisfaction.

AP: Did you enter HE from the employment perspective?

DW: No I wasn't thinking about employment. I did PPE at Oxford University because that is what I wanted to study. This remains a perfectly good reason for going to university today! However there were just as many people back then for whom the decision to enter higher education was vocational i.e. to get the specific qualification they needed to do a specific job – be it a medic, a chartered land surveyor, an engineer and so on. Then there were those who saw going to university as a way to boost their earnings.

My point is that individuals have all sorts of reasons for going to university. We are not saying that there is only one reason for going to university. We just want the relevant information out there, so whatever it is that an individual is focused on then they should be able to access it and make an informed choice based on facts.

AP: Equally it could be argued that by limiting incentive and choice within a consumerist model of higher education KIS will in fact lead prospective students to do exactly the opposite of what you say...

DW: This is a very good point, however I strongly believe that for most people going to university is a life transforming experience. Recently, a young journalist from a local university came over to do a practice interview with me. He told me that his original

¹Rt Hon David Willetts is the Minister of State for Universities and Science and Conservative Member of Parliament for Havant since 1992. He is as known for his intellectual as for his political output, and is based at the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). David's latest book, 'The Pinch: How the baby boomers took their children's future – and why they should give it back' was published earlier this year.

decision to study the subject was based on the fact that he wanted to be a journalist, but what actually happened during the course was that he suddenly became interested in world affairs. He now watches and reads the news with interest because suddenly it matters! His interest in journalism is now much deeper than 'just' vocational because of the experience!

So to recap, going to university is worthwhile in its own right but the massification of higher education means that people are entitled to work out what it means for their work prospects - and KIS will provide this sort of information too.

AP: So you believe that KIS should have been set up a while ago?

DW: The time is right. KIS has focused minds on the value of, not only universities as a whole, but on that of individual courses at individual universities. Last summer's anecdotes confirm there are more students going around campuses asking more questions than ever before. Young people have suddenly realised that going to university is very big decision about their future; that they will be paying 29 per cent income tax as an adult as a result of going to university; that they will spend three years of their lives, not just in union bars, but also working hard towards their chosen investment. They are now asking questions such as, 'how crowded is the seminar going to be?', 'how many essays do I have to write?', 'how well equipped are the labs?', 'what sort of jobs have the people that did this course got into?'

AP: Do you mean that it will have a direct impact on the student experience?

DW: Indeed! I think what it will drive a cultural change in universities to get them to focus on teaching as much as on research. There are strong incentives rewarding research but there have not been similar incentives focusing on teaching. I think KIS will change that.

AP: HECSU's Futuretrack research confirms that most people go to university not only because they enjoy their subject but also because they anticipate improved employment prospects. Do you think that we currently provide enough information and advice about the relationship between courses and employment outcomes?

DW: We need to do much better. I think that information and advice has to get a lot more 'micro',

in other words I want to see granular and targeted advice. A good example is the fascinating NESTA study on computer games courses which shows that there are courses in some universities that have very good employment prospects and others that don't. In this fashion I want to see other industry associations 'kite-marking' the courses with the greatest value. This is not quite accrediting, since it is not a condition of employment, but a ticking of the box - a course approved by industry as a good introduction to the relevant subject matter. There needs to be more of that, and that is what we are pushing for.

AP: So you anticipate 'big' connections between industry and the HE sector?

DW: Absolutely. I want for example the BBC to say, 'we rate and we actively recruit from this media studies course' - and it shouldn't be every such course in the country that they rate. In fact I urge them to urgently be selective! Employers such as the BBC, Rolls Royce, GSK, etc - either individually or through representative groups they are members of - must signal the courses they value.

AP: How do you think that schools should balance the provision of information about HE with advice and guidance about how to make sense of the information?

DW: The bill currently going through Parliament states that as from September 2012 schools will be under a duty to secure impartial careers guidance for their pupils. Since schools know the needs of their pupils best they will be free to decide what form this takes. The way that I envisage it is that there will be a lot of raw data which we will produce and release at BIS so that social enterprises like HECSU can put into formats young people will use. For example by creating mobile phone apps that enable young people to check out organised material on line. At some point however they will want contact with someone who has direct experience. So what I think we will see in schools and colleges in the future is analysed and organised data, supported by some form of direct personal communication.

AP: So it is about getting 'The Big Society' involved...

DW: Exactly! Advice and guidance need not be delivered by public sector employees alone. Schools should also be making contracts with outside organisations and charities - for example a group like HECSU could think about bidding for some of the

work. Indeed schools will be obliged to show that they are securing such independent careers advice and guidance.

AP: Can you tell us more about how you see the UK's higher education system contributing to economic growth in the next few years?

DW: We must always remember that universities are worthwhile institutions in their own right – Britain is in a deeper sense enriched by having universities as good as ours. However universities do also contribute to the economy. Indeed one of the crucial statistics the OECD uses when assessing a country's long term growth rate is its percentage of graduates.

In addition to their invaluable research output they contribute in the sense of producing a well educated population with the right skills. They also contribute by making connections at the heart of the city or region – and there is a lot of money flowing from universities to their regions! They can provide services to SMEs, they have bits of kit that an individual SME might not be able to afford but could rent, they have experts that can be used, and so on.

When we put all that together – training people, research of long term significance, plus their value as important players in the local economy and sources of funding and services – there is a lot that universities can do to contribute to economic growth.

AP: How do you think the HE sector and business should go about encouraging, and supporting, more graduates to consider SMEs as a career option?

DW: Through developing robust avenues for entrepreneurship. The National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education aims to create an environment in HEIs in which entrepreneurship flourishes and this is a great place to start. Entrepreneurship is not some rare genetic gift – it can be learnt and business schools are very important for that. Then there are the student enterprising societies and we want to see one of these existing in every university. These are just some of the ways we can encourage the creation of SMEs by graduates through entrepreneurship.

AP: What would you like to see available as careers support for postgraduates and researchers?

DW: I think supporting postgraduates in their careers is very important – we certainly can't leave them out! Of course university careers services do help them but some doctoral training centres are also great places. These institutions bring a lot of people from both industry and academia together, thus ensuring that there is good access to this 'specialist' sort of careers advice. According to the Concordat (and quite rightly so) it is very important that the senior researchers and principal investigators recognise their obligation to advise and assist researchers to develop their careers. More engagement from them is important, so there is more we need to do in this area.

AP: Finally, what advice can you give to UK universities that will help them maintain their international competitiveness in these challenging times?

DW: I take universities with me on trade missions around the world – to Brazil, India, China, Russia and so on – with the aim of raising their profile and to make it absolutely clear that legitimate students from abroad are welcome to come and study in the UK. These missions are also intended to help out with the setting up of campus branches abroad and with the creation of other links with HE systems around the world – our universities should be getting involved with these missions.

Another important thing our universities can do is hold down their costs. Competitiveness is partly about the amount of money charged – I would recommend Ian Diamond's report, which has got some excellent ideas on efficiency savings.

In a nutshell, it is all about raising the profile, being proud of the brand of British higher education around the world, and holding down costs so that it is affordable. In addition to their deeper value universities are now a big part of the economy – and this is happening in advanced countries around the world. Globalisation in higher education is not an impediment but actually provides an opportunity for our universities to take on yet another important role.

You can find out more about BIS at www.bis.gov.uk
You can also catch up with BIS via Twitter at www.twitter.com/bisgovuk