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MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

More detail needed on A-level reforms

On Tuesday, Ofqual the exams regulator, published a letter from The Rt. Hon. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, detailing his priorities for A-level reform.

They are threefold: Mr. Gove wants to replace the existing modular A-level system with a single exam; he wants to establish AS-levels as standalone qualifications; and he wants to institute an advisory committee, ‘created’ by the Russell Group, to advise on A-level content.

By way of introduction, we would like to briefly restate our support for the closure of the January assessment window—as announced by Ofqual in November—which gave students the opportunity to re-take exams. We also welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to delay the implementation of A-level reforms until September 2015; although we must stress that to properly review and revise a

large number of A-levels will take time, so the DfE must ensure the time-scale is adequate. These reforms are too important to be rushed through.

Nonetheless, the 1994 Group are worried by the current lack of clarity on some issues. Firstly, much has been left unclear about the role and nature of the Advisory Group. Will it just look at “facilitating subjects” such as Maths and English, or will it look at all A-levels? If the former, it risks creating a two-tier system.

Secondly, how will the Advisory Group engage with the best academics from across the sector, from universities to learned societies? Elizabeth Truss MP, Minister for Education, gave some clarification in the Commons yesterday: “I have spoken to a number of universities, both in the Russell Group and outside, as well as the 1994 [G]roup and Universities UK, and I am absolutely clear that we need su-

bject experts from across all the universities to be involved in the process, so that we get A-levels that reflect the broad consensus across universities.” But, transparent processes will be needed to identify the best academics and the leading institutions to guide these reforms.

Thirdly, the current AS-level provides a useful indicator of progress, which is invaluable for university admissions. We worry that without these results universities will have to place more emphasis on A-level predicted grades—of which more than half are wrong—school references, or older GCSE grades. From our experience these are less reliable, and would unduly prejudice disadvantaged students who receive less help when applying to university.

Alex Bols
[Read coverage of our comments in the TES.](#) ■

1994 GROUP IN THE MEDIA

Edward Acton: universities can lead recovery on international students

Prof. Edward Acton, vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia, spoke at the Annual International Student Experience Conference.

In the speech, covered by the *THE* and the *BBC*, Prof. Acton said that the negative “Home Office rhetoric needs to be vigorously countered by bringing home the quality and the personal care available at British universities.”

Prof. Acton went onto

say that, “1994 Group universities with their combination of research intensity and personal attention for individual students means that they are particularly adept at ensuring that students from abroad are integrated socially, stretched intellectually and benefit to the full from studying here.”

Watch Prof. Edward Acton’s speech.
[Read coverage in the Times Higher Educational Supplement and the BBC.](#)

1994 Group raises worries about the latest UCAS figures

Alex Bols, Executive Director of the 1994 Group, stressed his concerns about the latest UCAS figures, which showed a significant drop in the number of university acceptances across the 2012-13 cycle.

Speaking to *The Telegraph* and the *BBC*, Mr. Bols said that the Government must “act quickly” to resolve any problems. He went onto say that during the 2012–13 application cycle students might have been put off by the new loans repayment system and the large

perceived ‘debt’. He said that “if [this was] the case, we would call on the Government to launch a high-profile campaign to better explain the system.”

[Read the full press release.](#)
[Read coverage in The Telegraph and the BBC.](#)

1994 Group welcomes Education UK

Alex Bols welcomed the launch of a new expert team to promote UK education abroad. Speaking to the *THE*, Mr. Bols said that while the scheme was welcome, the Government needed to do more “joined-up” thi-

nking, saying that “UK-TI . . . [was] promoting UK education whilst . . . the Home Office and UKBA [was]

restricting access”. Mr. Bols urged the new task force to proactively publicise our leading universities and help interna-

tional students navigate the complex visa system. [Read the full press release.](#) [Read coverage in the Times Higher Educational](#)

[Supplement, Research Fortnight, and University World News.](#) ■

POLICY WAVES

Credit where it is due on international students

In addition to their much-cited economic impact, international students make significant educational, cultural and social contributions to our universities.

In terms of finances, last year international students paid £2.5bn to universities in tuition fees, and added another £4.5bn to the wider economy through spending on local services. These are funds that support universities as they withstand public sector cuts and maintain demand in local economies as domestic consumers belt-tighten. Additionally, these students are likely to retain a long-term affinity for the UK, resulting in future economic benefits.

And international students offer a lot more besides. They provide employers with a pool of highly talented graduates, they add welcome cultural diversity to our campuses, and they cement UK global influence. It is for these reasons that 1994 Group universities have invested in meaningful, long-term relationships with overseas institutions.

Unfortunately, recent growth in the number of international students coming to study in the UK has slowed. Last year, while the global

market for higher education grew by 7%, the number studying in the UK increased by a marginal 0.8%. More worryingly, between 2000–09, intense competition from Canada, Australia, and the USA saw the UK’s market share dip from 10.8% to 9.9%.

For these reasons the 1994 Group quickly and firmly welcomed the Government’s new international education taskforce. Education UK—a 10-strong team supported by UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)—will promote the UK’s world class education system abroad, targeting “fast-growing markets such as India and the Middle East”.

But we worry about mixed messages from the Government.

While UKTI, BIS, and universities invest in the international market, the Home Office has continually put up road blocks. The inclusion of international students in the migration cap is particularly puzzling. As the vast majority of international students return to their home country after study, we should only be counting those that stay. As the Government is committed to reducing the number of immigrants from the hun-

dreds of thousands to the tens of thousands, this change will be key to protecting the health of the UK’s universities. As such, we, once again, call on the Government to remove international students from the migration cap—5 Select Committees have formally recommended the same thing.

Secondly, The Rt. Hon. Theresa May, the Home Secretary, must tone down her over-zealous rhetoric. [Earlier this week, Prof. Edward Acton, vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia, criticized Ms. May for her “negative rhetoric”.](#) With the number of Indian students coming to the UK falling by an eye watering 23.5%, the Home Secretary must make room in her speeches for legitimate, sincere and hardworking students too.

If the Government can coordinate a coherent, joined-up campaign, then educational exports can resuscitate the UK economy and drive growth. We applaud UKTI and BIS for taking the first step.

[Watch Prof. Edward Acton’s speech on international students](#)

[Read our ‘Current Issues’ feature on international students from last week.](#) ■

OUR UNIVERSITIES IN THE MEDIA

[Lancaster University will build a new research lab to investigate how speech is manipulated](#)

A new research centre at Lancaster University will investigate how language—from hate speech to climate debate—is manipulated in the public discourse.

The Centre for Cor-

pus Approaches to Social Science (CASS), which will cost £3.5m, is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Lancaster pioneered the use of algorithmic textual analysis, which uses computer programmes to find linguistic patterns unnoticeable to the human eye.

Professor Tony McE-

nelly, Director of CASS, said: “As the Centre involves all the faculties at Lancaster, it will bring the benefits of the corpus approach to as wide a range of social science disciplines as possible and train a new generation of social sciences researchers to use these techniques.”

[University of Loughborough students win](#)

[international design competition](#)

A team of students from Loughborough University has bettered competition from around the world to win a £25,000 innovation prize.

The ‘Innovation Open’ competition, sponsored by Phillips, invited young inventors to put forward ideas for new,

commercially-viable products. Finalists were then selected to present their ideas to a panel of international experts.

The team's proposed product uses cutting-edge ultrasonic technology to clean teeth effectively and quickly.

UEA spin-out wins Government contract

Adapt Commercial, a company owned by the University of East Anglia, has won a contract with the Department of Energy and Climate Change to research ways of generating energy from wetland reeds.

The project will centre on reeds that grow naturally in the East Anglian wetland areas. The plan is to turn these reeds into clean fuel, so they can be used to power the cooling and heating systems of gasification plants.

Chris Blincoe, Adapt

Commercial manager, said: "We will explore how wetland sites in East Anglia could be managed in a cost effective and beneficial manner—resulting in increasing the amount of power we can get from clean green sources." ■

HE AGENDA

29/01/13 - Lords Science and Technology Select Committee: 'Open access'

30-31/01/13 - Vitae policy forum

30-31/01/13 - HE Academy workshop: 'Furthering equality in international higher education'

31/01/13 - Lords Main Chamber: 'Impact of student visa policy on

admissions to universities'

05/02/13 - UUK immigration workshop: 'Preparing for Tier 4 audits'

05/02/13 - Vitae semina: 'Open access research and the future for academic publishing'

05/02/13 - UUK immigration workshop: 'Preparing for Tier 4 audits'

06/02/13 - An audience with Sir Tim

Wilson and Prof. Penaluna: 'The role of enterprise education in achieving economic and social impact'

05/02/13 - HE Academy workshop: 'Problem-based learning to develop and enhance employability skills'

19/02/13 - UUK immigration workshop: 'Retaining highly trusted status' ■