

Welcome to this first digest of developments in higher education – for the period from July to November 2009 produced by HEPI exclusively for HEPI’s University Partners. The aim is to provide each term (or every four months) a summary of the most

significant developments, together with a brief commentary on each. The digest should be of particular interest to those concerned with policy and strategy in individual institutions as well as to senior management in national bodies.

Department for Business Innovation and Skills

In June, the Government announced the merger of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills with the department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to create the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) under the First Secretary and Business Secretary Lord Mandelson.

On 27 July, Lord Mandelson spoke at Birkbeck College to senior representatives of higher education about ‘The transformation of higher education’ – a revolution in attitudes to science and the developing science of technology, a massive expansion in the range and focus of universities, and a change in social attitudes to higher education. He acknowledged the scale of change which had taken place in the universities – a much wider range of male and female students, a more substantial role in research, and a source of progressive and critical thinking that has shaped society. He promised a flagship policy statement on the higher education framework in the autumn.



Mandelson: spoke on ‘the transformation of higher education’

Quality

He offered comments on the economic role of universities, pointing out that the modern global economy places a premium on specialisation. The quality of UK universities and research base had played a critical role in inward investment from knowledge intensive busi-

ness. The same level of quality had seen the UK become the second biggest destination for overseas students. The key to producing employable people is the relationship between universities, employers and students – where he acknowledged that business had not always been effective in its communications about what was needed. There was more to be achieved too, and not necessarily in conventional campus-based universities, in widening access into universities and in the provision for part-time and mature students.

consider together fees, access, and student support. He welcomed the continuing debate on these issues but stressed the need for the debate to reach some hard and fast conclusions.

In his summing up, Lord Mandelson pointed to the risk of failing to exploit the role of university education in promoting social mobility.

He had already been struck by the massive appetite in the sector for relevance to our economic and social challenges in a globalised economy. Building our national strengths in knowledge and innovation is an essential part of this and is the remit of a modern university.

COMMENTARY

In his first speech Lord Mandelson trails themes that were later to be repeated in the Government’s HE framework document (see page 7), in particular emphasising the role of university in social mobility and in serving the economy – roles which in general universities are already pursuing. The flagship policy statement by Lord Mandelson on 3 November develops this approach.

Funding

On funding and access, Lord Mandelson acknowledged that excellence is not cheap. He stressed the need to

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