

Applications and Admissions

David Lammy

The Sector and DIUS

Thank you Phil and good morning everyone.

It's great to be here with you today on what is my second day in this new job.

I'm a great believer that new Ministers shouldn't arrive in a post with a string of new announcements and initiatives. So you will be relieved to know that is not what you will hear from me today.

Instead, in the time that I have available today before I am whisked away to my next appointment, am here to listen and talk with you.

And I am here to give you a sense of where I am coming from as I start this job.

I see this sector is one of Britain's great success stories: admired abroad and a driver of social and economic progress at home.

I think that success story was reflected in the Prime Minister's decision to create DIUS as a Department in its own right just over a year ago.

And it's why I was incredibly pleased to be given this job.

Personal history and the value of education

My own life has taught me the value of a great education and the opportunity to go to university.

I spent three fantastic years at SOAS in the 1990s studying Law and enjoying the atmosphere of free thinking that surrounds that university.

I had an incredible time at Harvard after that. A place where I officially I studied law – but also where I spent much of my time sneaking into the back of lecture theatres to listen to great thinkers talking about everything from politics to the arts.

And it's been a pleasure to remain connected to this sector in my professional life, as a fellow of Caribbean Studies at Warwick University and in accepting an honorary doctorate from the University of East London.

For all these reasons and because of this experience, I understand what a liberal arts education can offer:

- In broadening horizons and teaching people to think critically about the world around them
- In developing character and self-discipline as people learn to work independently after years at school

- And of course in equipping people with the skills they need for the modern world – in the knowledge that on average graduates are healthier, wealthier and significantly more likely to rise to positions of authority than those who do benefit from the opportunity to stay on in education in some form.

Eight years ago when I entered parliament I said in my maiden speech that I believe we must invest in people's souls as well as their skills – and I bring that same conviction to this job.

Admissions - working together

I'm also someone who is more interested in thinking about what we can do together rather than what looks too difficult for anyone to do on their own.

We're here today to talk about admissions and I think too often the debate about access has become stuck in a place where young people are simply told to be more aspirational or where universities are told to drop their standards.

I'm not interested in either of those ideas.

No sane Government would want to take decisions about which individuals should and shouldn't be allowed to go to which university. And this one certainly doesn't.

And no progressive government is ever going to stop looking for ways to give children from all backgrounds a chance to fulfil their potential and go to a great university. No-one here today wants to do that – or believes that it would be in the best interests of either the sector or the country.

Instead I'm interested in the things that we can do when we all work together.

How parents, school, local authorities, central government and universities can work together in a more systematic way to nurture talent, to stretch young people and to raise their sights at a young age.

Work already in place

That means that ensuring we have a transparent system is important to maintain public trust. But it is also projects with the ethos of Aimhigher that I am interested in looking at and making more of. Because Aimhigher is backed with funding from my Department but it's not just Government direction that makes it work.

What makes it so valuable is that it builds partnerships between the sector and all the other people across the country who have an interest in helping young people develop the ability and the confidence to go on to university.

Whether that is individual mentors who are helping young people to overcome the most daunting physical and social obstacles to getting on in life. Or whether it is taster days, or summer schools, that demonstrate to young people that staying on in education is something that is not just for other people.

I am aware that the same sort of partnership ethos lies behind new efforts to provide good information, advice and guidance in schools. I am interested to learn more about how colleges and universities are working together through dialogue on curriculum and other issues.

And I know the same vision lies behind the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service:

- Making the whole process of applying for university easier and less intimidating
- Providing a one-stop shop for the sort of information on higher education that young people need in order to decide whether and where to apply
- Developing excellent services for prospective applicants from overseas.

And it's great to hear about initiatives in the sector itself, like the announcement only last week that nine of our most selective universities – Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester, King's College London, Leeds, Warwick, Newcastle, Southampton and Exeter – will be establishing a "pooling talent" scheme to give young people from all backgrounds the chance they deserve.

Conclusion

So today I want to acknowledge the work that's being done, which I know is often unsung.

I want you to know that I am interested in finding more ways in which we can all work together to achieve some common goals.

And I want to say again what a privilege it is to take up this position to work with a sector that has it in its gift to help make society:

- more prosperous
- more open
- more inclusive
- more knowledgeable
- ...and more intellectually curious than the society that our parents or their parents grew up in.

I am looking forward to working with you all.

Thank you very much.