

**Michael Farthing speech at 'Enhancing the Student Experience
Conference 2011'**

Venue: The Kings Fund, 11-13 Cavendish Square, London W1G 0AN

Date and time: Tuesday 15 November 2011, 9.55-10.15

Speech title: 'The future student experience'

It's a pleasure to be here today, giving my first speech as Chairman of the 1994 Group. The Group's members are some of the world's most impressive HE institutions, with research and teaching records that are the envy of many. It really is an honor to represent such a Group.

As many of you will know, the Group came together in 1994 - as the name suggests - as an informal gathering of like-minded Vice-Chancellors from institutions with common attributes - smaller, research intensive, mostly campus-based institutions. Over the years, as they shared their experiences and insights with one another, the Group began to recognise the need for a more formally constituted body. They saw that HE was changing and that institutions like theirs needed to have a strong collective voice. So, the 1994 Group as we know it today was formed - a Group promoting the values of research-intensive institutions through active national engagement on HE policy based on sound policy analysis and constructive recommendations.

One of the major pieces of work produced by the 1994 Group was the 'Enhancing the Student Experience' policy statement, in 2007.

The statement was born of the 1994 Group's shared belief that the quality of the student experience was a key measure of quality in HE. That this seems obvious today is

testament to the work that the Group has done over the years to drive the student experience up the agenda, but we shouldn't forget that some other leading HE institutions have often seen the needs of students as secondary to research. 1994 Group institutions believe that teaching is best when it is directly informed by research and are among the world's best precisely because of their commitment to both excellent research and outstanding teaching, not because they concentrate on one at the expense of the other.

[Pause]

The 2007 statement is worth re-reading, and the principles it embodies are as important now as they have ever been.

It said that there is no one single "the student experience" – it is as complex as the wide range of students we serve,

It said that institutions needed to constantly review and reevaluate the nature of their student experience to account for ever changing expectations.

And it said that institutions needed to take a holistic view - every aspect of an institution contributes to the student experience.

So when we talk about the student experience we're looking at a complex, ever-shifting, multi-faceted concept. And it has never been more important to discuss the student experience. The dramatic changes in the HE landscape of the past year and the tripling of fees mean that students are going to have the highest ever expectations as they embark

on their studies at university . We also need to accept that higher fees are going to mean we all have to work harder to make the case for investing in HE.

And I strongly believe that this case must be based on more than simple speculation about future salary prospects. Current evidence also indicates that university graduates are not only wealthier but happier and healthier than their non-graduate peers.

I'd like to try and move the debate forward this morning. The Government has made great play about the fact their reforms are intended to put 'students at the heart of the system' but I'm not quite sure that the proposals currently on the table are going to dramatically enhance the student experience. I'd like to talk a little about why this is and explain how I believe that the student experience is fundamentally about the long term relationship between the student and institution.

[PAUSE]

We'll start then with a look at the Government's proposals to reform HE. It is almost a year now since Parliament voted to support a rise in tuition fees, and the vote is already seen as one of the defining moments of the Coalition Government. The vote took place in an incredibly tense context – Liam's predecessor addressed this conference last year in the aftermath of the NUS organised protest march - and the political implications are likely to be long lasting, as we may well see in particular constituencies at the next election.

But, one year on, how do we assess the impact of Parliament's decision? Well, the first thing to say is that for universities, the prospect of raising tuition fees offered the only answer to the 80%cuts in direct public funds for teaching. As the 1994 Group said at the

time, sustained investment was needed to ensure that institutions could continue to deliver existing levels of quality for students, let alone make improvements for the future. We were publicly agnostic about the balance between public and private funding – although some of us judged that the speed of the shift from taxpayer to graduate was too rapid; what else has tripled in price in one financial year? But we held to the principle that any funding system should not place barriers to study in front of talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We took the view that the system of subsidised loans and graduate repayments only when incomes were over £21k were enough to avoid this.

Essentially, the Government replaced direct public funds to universities with subsidised loans to students. At first glance at least this seemed to have the potential to drive improvements in the student experiences– Giving students the power to choose and fund those institutions that best meet their expectations – puts real pressure on institutions to raise their game. However, I believe there is still much work to do in the wider communication of the implications of the new funding regime both for future students and the universities they select.

However, it quickly became apparent that the Government had not fully appreciated the level at which institutions would need to set fees. The vast majority of institutions came forward with proposals to set their fees at or around the upper limit of £9000. This is completely understandable – as I said earlier, universities need sustained sources of investment to ensure long term quality. But the Treasury, that will of course have to subsidise student loans, had modeled on the assumption of much lower average fees.

The funding gap this presented had the potential to cause real problems – there were warnings from some that the ‘black hole’ could only be filled by a reduction in overall

student numbers. Clearly something had to give and when the Government finally published their much delayed HE White Paper it became clear what this would be.

The standout proposal in the White Paper was the move to transfer student places to institutions charging fees below £7,500, and to uncap the number of places for students with A Level grades of AAB and above. The problem is that the numbers of high-quality places for students that do not achieve AAB are dramatically reduced as a result. This means that the majority of students will actually have less choice available about where to study. Frankly speaking, this is very odd situation to have reached.

We are faced with a situation where universities that offer excellent teaching and facilities, universities able to stretch the academic potential of students, universities with proven track records in widening participation, universities in more demand than any others, will have the amount of places they offer to students reduced. Meanwhile, numbers will move to institutions pledging to make lower than average investments in the quality of their experience. This is a long way away from a system that empowers students to choose the institution that best meets their expectations.

So, the first problem with the Government's reforms of HE is that they will actually reduce the amount of choice students enjoy.

The second problem is just how much the Government's plans for HE lack ambition. At every step of the way the Government seems to have viewed HE purely in terms of young undergraduates studying for their first degree, and even more worrying, it has too often in its thinking seen these undergraduates as consumers. These consumers are to be empowered through the kite marking that is the Key Information Sets. Of course, every

institution needs to be absolutely clear and transparent about the courses they offer, and the Key Information Sets will be a useful tool. Indeed, most 1994 Group institutions already provide the information included in them.

But really! Are we saying that the student experience offered by UK universities can be summed up by data on things like contact hours and salary expectations? I sincerely hope not.

Let me be clear. Yes, students should have the power to direct funding to the institutions they feel meet their expectations. And yes, institutions must be transparent about the basic features of each and every course. But we cannot fall into the trap of reducing higher education to a set of simple transactions. Universities are so much more than warehouses that sell off the shelf qualifications, and students are more than consumers purchasing degree certificates.

We need to talk about the student experience less in terms of transactions and more in terms of relationships. Universities are communities where people come together to create and share knowledge. We do students a disservice if we value them as anything other than active participants in these communities.

[PAUSE]

So what do I mean when I talk about the relationship between the institution and the student? Well, a good place to start is by recognizing that when somebody goes to university, in most cases they are doing more than simply attending lectures and submitting assignments. They are immersing themselves in an academic environment,

joining new social networks and developing insights and understandings that will stay with them throughout their lives. This is just as true for part-time and distance learning students as it is for full time undergraduates. They may not be living and socializing on campus, but they will be part of a developing peer group and have regular contact with academics and learning facilities.

The student experience draws on every aspect of university life and work, and is long-lasting. And while I'm reluctant to reduce it into simplistic definitions, for the purposes of today I'm going to talk about four aspects of this type of student experience.

First, the 'applicant experience'. The contact a potential student has with an institution occurs well before they arrive at the campus gates. I've already spoken about the need for clear and transparent information to aid decision making about courses, but establishing a good relationship early on requires more than the provision of simple datasets. The HE sector talks a lot about Information, Advice and Guidance, but often, in practice, not enough attention is paid to the latter two of these. Information on HE is widely available, from formal sources like Key Information Sets and university prospectuses, to informal routes like student review websites. There is room for tools that help applicants navigate this array of information. This is something the 1994 Group have been actively pursuing. We've been working with Push, 'the ruthlessly independent university guide', to develop an online resource that filters and aggregates sources of information about HE and student life. Called UNiQs, the resource will be available for schools, colleges and universities to download and place on their own websites, providing a route to pre-screened, quality checked information for applicants making decisions about where to apply. Johnny Rich from Push will be speaking more about UniQs in one of this afternoon's seminar sessions.

This is just one example of how universities themselves can reach out and work with potential students at the applicant stage. Interventions of this type can help lay the groundwork for the long term relationship between institution and student.

But there is more to the applicant experience than merely easing the path of those already destined for higher education. We also need to think about the widening participation work we do.

It's very tempting for the most selective institutions to pass the buck when it comes to encouraging people from a wider range of backgrounds into university. We've all heard the well rehearsed lines about how the problems of social mobility through education are entirely down to schools, and if only they worked harder to improve the grades of poorer applicants everything would be all right.

Quite frankly, this is a dereliction of duty. It's in every institution's interest to seek out talent from every background, and work with that talent from an early stage to make sure they are ready to thrive in HE when the time comes. 1994 Group institutions take a proactive approach. As is evident in the access agreements we have forged with OFFA, the Group's members carry out a wide range of outreach programmes, in partnership with schools and colleges. At Sussex for example, we have plans to establish 80 new partnerships with schools and colleges by 2016. This not only helps raise aspiration and achievement in some of the most disadvantaged areas, but ultimately results in more diverse and enriched student communities. This is a key factor on the next aspect of the relationship-based student experience: the 'campus experience'.

[PAUSE]

When a student chooses a university, they are often making a significant choice about where and how they want to live, as well as an academic one. Often they are moving to a new area, living away from home for the first time, and spending a substantial amount of time with peers from wholly different backgrounds. Even for part time and mature students not immersing themselves in campus living, the social experience of HE may be unlike anything they have encountered elsewhere.

You could even argue that it is this social aspect that most influences a student's overall perception of their HE experience.

I said earlier that universities are communities. It's important not to underestimate the value of this. The type of experience offered by each institution is not controlled from the VC's office,[however much I might like to imagine otherwise]. Rather it develops organically among the people that make up the university community. By being part of a richly diverse student body and spending time in an environment with plenty of social and extra-curricular opportunities, students can enjoy an experience that complements their academic development. By investing time and effort in creating the conditions for a fulfilling campus experience, universities can enhance the overall relationship they have with students. At Sussex we started a project called 'extending the learning conversation' beyond the classroom, by providing students in two of our schools with a relatively modest sum of money to create a social space where they can meet informally with peers and their lecturers, thereby taking the focus off contact time alone. The pilot was a great success and we are rolling it out across the university.

One of the determining factors of the campus experience is the internationalism of institutions. UK universities are global in their outlook, forming partnerships with institutions around the world and inviting students from many different countries to join their communities. Many 1994 Group Universities will have more than 100 different nations represented on campus. This cosmopolitanism contributes greatly to the strength of the student experience. However, there is a real danger that the current rhetoric from the Government about international students is putting this at risk. Just a couple of weeks ago the immigration Minister was trumpeting the success the Home Office has had in reducing the numbers of international students coming to the UK, in part through closing many of the 'pathway programmes' that prepare students for study in the UK. This runs the risk of damaging the UK's ability to attract high calibre international students, and the Government should think very carefully about the messages it is conveying to the world. I would argue that the visa application process is still too burdensome and is acting as a disincentive to coming to the UK to study.

[PAUSE]

It seems obvious that we should include the 'academic experience' as part of the relationship-based student experience. Of course, this means ensuring that teaching is of the highest quality, and that academic rigor is upheld. But it also means recognizing the value of studying in a research-intensive environment. As I said at the start, the 1994 Group firmly believes that excellent research-informed teaching is the to an outstanding student experience. This is not just a statement of belief. The difference between school and university teaching is that we draw on knowledge and understanding which is actively being created in our institutions. [As we say – you're not being taught from a textbook, you're being taught by the guys (men and women) who are actually writing the textbook.]. This is one of the most powerful determinants of the relationship between student and

institution – it means that the experience at each institution will be unique. This principle should be cherished and protected.

There is also inherent value in being present in an environment where world-class research is taking place. The History student at Durham may not be in day to day contact with the ground-breaking life-sciences work being done on campus, but they will no doubt feel proud of the overall culture of innovation. At Sussex we have a summer vacation ‘taster’ research experience for a selected group of undergraduates, the so-called Junior Research Associate Scheme. Many will write up their work as their first paper and a high proportion go on to register for a PhD. One of the biggest disappointments of the HE White Paper was the near complete lack of attention it gave to research. We are promised proposals to support research soon. But by decoupling research from teaching Government has failed to recognise the holistic experience that universities strive to create for students.

And even if we accept that the WP was about a narrow concept of teaching, the lack of attention being paid to post-graduates is an even greater cause for concern. Cuts in the teaching grant will impact on post-graduates just as much as under-graduates. But there is as yet no access to subsidised student loans for them.

The lack of attention to PG support risks cutting off the pipeline of future researchers and academic staff for our UK universities. In addition many Masters Programmes prepare graduates for entry into the professions and develop knowledge and skills for other employment opportunities. The overseas PGR students returning as successful PhDs from the UK to the burgeoning university sectors in their home countries represents a

serious risk to the UK's future economic development. The Government urgently needs to come up with proposals to mitigate this risk.

[PAUSE]

The final factor I want to mention today is the 'graduate experience'.

The role of a university is to help open up a world of knowledge to students; to develop their understanding and insight; to provide them with opportunities to explore intellectual interests. This is fundamentally different from vocational training, and it would be a tragedy if higher education was viewed solely as a precursor to employment. However, it is absolutely right that students will want to see their career prospects enhanced as a result of their time in higher education.

This means recognising and valuing the types of vocational skills developed during study in HE, and ensuring that students recognise and value them also. It means enhancing links with business and industry in higher education, making sure that courses reflect the ever-changing needs of employers. This is something the Government has recognised, and I'm encouraged by the work Sir Tim Wilson is doing to review links between industry and higher education. We will all no doubt look closely at his report in the New Year.

But the graduate experience is about more than employability. If the student experience has been good, if the relationship with the student is strong, then graduates will feel an attachment to their institution throughout their lives. In part this is down to the connections forged during their time studying, the networks developed and social capital accrued. But it is also down to a sense of pride felt at having been part of an excellent university

community. I know that for Sussex students being one of our alumni is part of their identity – and, perhaps even more importantly, they are a vital part of our identity too.

Not only does this help enhance institutional reputation – helping to create a circle of virtue where a future student's first contact with an institution is through a former students – it enhances the motivation for alumni to actively contribute to the continued success of their institution. Not just financially, but through their time as mentors to our students, their experience as curriculum or industry advisers, and their advocacy,

[PAUSE]

To sum up then, we cannot afford to treat the student experience as a simple set of transactions between student consumers and university providers. This would grossly underestimate the value of higher education. Rather we should seek to foster and value a system where students have creative, multi-faceted lifelong relationships with their university.

From research and teaching to internationalism and employability, every element of our universities impact upon the student experience. By limiting the choice on offer to students, and disregarding much of the work universities carry out, the Government has not yet created the conditions for a truly transformative student experience in the UK.

I believe that David Willetts, the Universities Minister, is a thoughtful politician who will appreciate the need for the Government to show more ambition for higher education. I sincerely hope that he begins to explain how the Government will work to support

universities and students in creating the types of student experience I have spoken about today.

Thank you.