

ASEMME7 speech: Towards the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development: How can the ASEM Education Process contribute?

Introduction

Thank you [name] for those kind words.

Good morning everyone. I'm delighted and honoured to be joining you here. And I'd like to thank the Romanian government for organising this event and in such a showstopper of a building. International gatherings like this one are so valuable in helping to shape those aims and visions we all share.

We may all have different cultures, different languages We certainly have very different architecture but some things are universal. We all know and value the importance of education. None of us can afford not to invest in preparing future generations to meet the challenges we all face, both at home in our individual countries, and as part of a wider global brotherhood.

This is a very timely point to discuss our collective progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Rightly, there has been a great deal of media interest in this recently. In the UK, we are currently undergoing our voluntary national review of the SDGs.

The vision and reform of national education policies are key to driving forward our progress towards achieving the SDGs. But you know Ladies and gentlemen, we can only go so far on our own. To really achieve our goals, to really drive those changes we all need, our best course is to continue to talk to one another. International collaboration is vital. It's key to our collective success. It allows us to share best practice and not least of all, it enables us to work together for the benefit of all.

But before we look at some of those opportunities, I would like to share with you some of things we've been doing in the UK to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Early years

In the UK, we are in the middle of an ambitious transformation of the education system. We have introduced a range of policies in all sectors, from early years to higher education, which are driving forwards our progress towards the SDGs.

Let me begin by looking at the earliest years of a child's development, and the importance of getting this phase right in order to tackle long-term social disadvantage and to narrow the attainment gap.

These early years are when the foundations are laid for developing a child's potential and when you can have the biggest impact on setting a child on the right path.

That's why the government has extended high-quality pre-school education and childcare as a priority. Our universal early education offer provides 3- and 4-year olds and the most disadvantaged 2-year olds with 15 hours a week of funded early years education.

In September 2017, we launched a new 30 hours free childcare programme for working families with 3- and 4-year-olds. These initiatives ensure that the vast majority of young children are participating in organised education before the official primary school entry age, which is increasing the proportion of children achieving a good level of development.

We know that far too many children are arriving at school without the skills they need to progress. They lag behind their peers and will struggle to ever make up the gap. So we are developing programmes for parents to better engage with their children at home, which is where children learn these basic skills, through activities like reading aloud, singing nursery rhymes or playing games.

We are working with businesses and charities around the country to develop projects that will make it easy for parents to adopt positive behaviours and create a generation of confident learners who can read and communicate effectively. These are vital skills that children need to grasp from the earliest opportunity in order to succeed.

Schools

At the school level, raising standards for pupils from all backgrounds has been the driving force behind the government reforms since 2010. The government's mission is to provide all pupils, whatever their abilities and wherever they are from, with an education that will prepare them for a bright and fulfilling future, that makes the most of all the opportunities of the modern world.

In the UK, we believe that the best starting point for any educational journey is that all pupils are taught to read effectively.

On this, we have found the introduction of phonics to be particularly successful. Phonics teaches children how individual letters sound, helping them decode words as they read. Nine year olds in England achieved their highest ever score in reading in 2016, with the country rising from joint tenth to joint eighth in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings. This follows a greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum, and a particular focus on phonics.

We have backed up such curriculum reforms with targeted funding to support the most disadvantaged in our schools. Now disadvantage is a global issue: the average gap in performance between disadvantaged and advantaged students internationally is worth three years of schooling.

Our pupil premium grant has seen us spend over £15bn (pounds) since 2011 to provide schools with additional money to raise the attainment of almost 2 million disadvantaged pupils of all abilities. This has seen the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers decrease at both age 11 and age 16 since 2011.

We are also committed to ensuring that teaching remains an attractive and fulfilling profession. In January we launched the government's first-ever integrated strategy to recruit and retain more teachers in schools, developed collaboratively with the education sector. We have also set clear commitments to ensure that access to high quality professional development and support becomes the norm for all teachers,

regardless of where they are in the country.

At a broader system level, we have given our schools greater freedom and autonomy. This has empowered teachers and headteachers to take decisions which are right for their schools, and promoted an atmosphere of innovation and evidence. This has been fundamental to the improvements we have seen in our education system since 2010.

We have also committed £7 billion between 2015 and 2021 to deliver new school places and are on track to create 1 million places this decade (2010 to 2020), the largest increase in school capacity for at least two generations.

The results of these reforms are that the vast majority of our school-age children are offered a good education. As at December 2018, 85% of our schools were judged to be 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by our school inspectorate Ofsted.

Technical, vocational, and higher education

One of our key areas of reform has been to technical, vocational and tertiary education.

We are committed to providing high quality opportunities post-16 that give young people high quality choices that are held in the same kind of esteem as academic routes.

We are improving the quality of apprenticeships to allow everyone to gain the training and qualifications they need to enter the job market. We're introducing new technical qualifications called T Levels. These qualifications will combine longer teaching hours with industry placements, giving students the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers want.

We recognise the importance of lifelong learning too, so as one of our key initiatives we have announced plans for a National Retraining Scheme. This will be an ambitious, far-reaching programme to drive adult retraining. It will help those in jobs

at risk of technological change to gain new skills and secure the better, more stable jobs of the future.

Last year saw a record number of disadvantaged 18 year olds entering full time higher education, with the entry rate at 20.2%. This year we are bringing in a new Transparency Duty, which will require higher education providers to publish their respective student application, offer and progression rates by gender, ethnic background and socio-economic background. This will highlight which institutions need to go further in widening access and improving outcomes for all their students.

In an important step to providing affordable and quality higher education for all we have set up a new independent regulator for the higher education sector – the Office for Students. This body has an explicit legal duty to promote choice and equality of opportunity, and will also work to ensure that students from all backgrounds receive value for money.

Inclusivity

Throughout all these reforms runs the thread of inclusivity, which is of course a fundamental element of SDG4. The Children and Families Act for example sets out a presumption that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities should be educated in mainstream education.

We believe that the social interactions that occur within mainstream education and through extra-curricular activities, children and young people from a wide range of backgrounds and with a broad range of needs, can develop wider social skills which they will need to develop their potential.

We are also working to ensure that our school curriculum is inclusive. We have partnered with civil society organisations who are delivering programmes to prevent and tackle intolerance and bullying in schools. As part of the commitments made in our LGBT Action Plan, published in July 2018, £1million of additional funding was made available, and this programme has been extended to additional schools in England until March 2020.

In the biggest transformation to health education in 20 years, we have made age-appropriate relationships, sex and health education compulsory in schools, to make sure all children respect each other and are equipped with the knowledge to keep them healthy and safe and to manage their lives and relationships in a positive way.

International collaboration

Ladies and gentlemen, these are just some of the highlights of the UK's work across the whole of our educational landscape.

But however proud I am of all that we've achieved, I know there is still much more we can do and much I can learn from you. When you aspire to be the best in the world you need to pay attention to how the best do things. And so the UK regularly looks beyond its borders for inspiration, for better ways of doing things and we have collaborated with a number of the countries represented here today.

One of our longest running initiatives, for example, is the UK-Singapore Headteacher Exchange. Now in its 12th year, this programme provides an opportunity for headteachers to spend a week in each other's country to share policies and best practice on specific topics of interest.

In recent years, these have included use of textbooks, and special educational needs. The exchange has led to schools making changes to improve the quality of their curriculum and professional development for teachers, based on the successes of Singapore's high-performing education system.

We have expanded the British Council's Generation UK-China scheme, giving even more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to take up internships in China each year.

We also fund the Study China programme: a three-week taster of Chinese language and culture for undergraduate students in the UK.

These initiatives, which bring young people from both countries closer, are helping to raise an awareness of global citizenship and an appreciation of cultural diversity.

We have looked to high performing industrial countries like Germany, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, to understand how they manage to achieve parity between their technical and academic routes, and how they prepare young people to access the labour market.

These visits are helping to shape our own reforms to apprenticeships and technical qualifications, driving up standards and accessibility of these routes.

In higher education, which is perhaps the most internationalised sector of education, we are working to encourage worldwide student mobility and institutional partnerships.

We recently launched a new International Education Strategy which sets out our ambition to grow the numbers of international higher education students studying in the UK to 600,000 by 2030 up from 460,000 in 2017/18, which has been our highest level to date.

The UK strongly believes in the power of international student exchange as a way of creating a new generation of globally mobile, culturally agile people who can succeed in an increasingly international marketplace. We are delighted to offer Chevening Scholarships to provide study opportunities in the UK for the next generation of the world's leaders.

We are also proud to support a number of other global scholarships, such as the Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholarships. Funded by Commonwealth governments, this scheme provides enhanced access to higher education and improved mobility for young people to low and middle-income countries in the Commonwealth, which in turn supports sustainable development through the development of skills and leadership.

We have continued to support Universities UK International's Go International: Stand Out campaign to double the percentage of UK students undertaking a period of study abroad as part of their degree by 2020. We know that there are many exciting international opportunities available to UK students in a huge range of ASEM partner countries, and we are keen to work with you on this international agenda and to encourage our young people to seize these opportunities to develop their leadership

and global awareness.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, all of us here recognise the importance of education reform and international collaboration.

The ASEM Education Process offers all of us a wonderful opportunity to talk about our approaches, to innovate and to learn from each other's challenges and successes. I have greatly enjoyed meeting many of you at this meeting, and look forward to continuing these important conversations today and beyond. I know that when we come together like this, children with their whole lives still ahead of them will face a brighter future because of it.