

30 June 2020

Simon Clarke MP  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF  
United Kingdom

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Dear Mr Clarke

We are writing on behalf of University Alliance and our members - 12 leading professional and technical universities - respected for their role in delivering highly skilled, employable graduates.

Whether it's supporting businesses to grow; providing job ready graduates from law to accountancy, teaching to social work; using research in practical ways to support innovation and future discoveries; or supporting the NHS including through training over a quarter of the country's nurses, Alliance universities can help shape the UK's future and help to power the national recovery from this crisis.

Our purpose in writing to you is to bring to your attention key findings of our recent polling work, which we have commissioned through Public First and to suggest a set of high-level proposals to address the theme of this polling: *supporting the nation's post-pandemic economic, social and cultural recovery*.

Our universities are determined to play a key role in ensuring we not only avoid the worst-case scenario, but that we 'build back better', and indeed the polling highlights the public's expectation that higher education will be vital to navigating the post-pandemic recovery. The full findings are attached for your consideration, but we would like to draw your attention to two key results:

Our survey found that more than **seven out of ten people (71%)** think that universities are going to play an important role in supporting the UK's economic and social recovery post Covid, with improving scientific research for innovation and development (74%); training public sector workers (52%); and providing practical support at times of national crisis (52%) all identified as major priorities.

The survey also found that when it comes to the growth of small businesses and improving jobs and productivity at both a local and national level, over **half of the British public (55%)** believe universities play an important role.

Considering these findings, we would like to propose several workable solutions to the challenges ahead, many of which Alliance universities have extensive current and historic experience and success in delivering. These high-level proposals, which we have summarised briefly for the purpose of this letter, cover five key areas. The first of these has already been extensively worked up by Universities UK, led by our Chair, Professor Debra Humphris, working closely with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), which we are naturally supportive of.

### **1: A Nationwide Industry Placement Scheme**

UA universities offer an extensive range of industry placements through modules or sandwich courses, summer internships, graduate internships, volunteering, and student consulting opportunities. We propose the collective learning, experience, and connections to businesses through these schemes could be harnessed to create opportunities for graduates:

- A large-scale industry-based paid placement scheme targeted initially to the graduating cohort of 2020, alongside postgraduate students, but easily scalable to pick up school and college leavers.
- Participants would benefit from on the job training and experience, coupled with the prospect of permanent employment upon completion of training.
- We see this as an opportunity to target support to recent graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds; support the skills needs and growth sectors of all UK regions through Local Industrial Strategies; and ensure the post-pandemic recovery is economic, social and cultural by placing graduates in the third sector, as well as SMEs, based on the need of sectors in each region.
- Support for making the shorter-term Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) model available nationwide could be an element of the scheme and is another example of how graduate employment and support for SMEs could be simultaneously addressed.

### **2: A Public Sector Recruitment Accelerator Programme**

Despite a recession looming, we will still have employment shortages in key public sector skills, and there are likely to be added pressures in areas such as health and social care from the impact of the pandemic. We propose a Public Sector Recruitment Accelerator programme, comprising:

- The introduction of bursaries for those public sector courses where these are not already in place.
- A targeted approach to supporting increased numbers of placements, especially in geographic areas where there are clear workforce deficits or challenges.
- A coordinated campaign to encourage both career-changers and new entrants to consider working in the public sector, comprising a central core message with regional nuance.

- An expansion of additional places for the various entry points on certain designated, critical courses throughout 2020/21 at Alliance universities, on a region by region basis, in line with available placements as they expand.

### **3: Reskill and Upskill for Prosperity**

The pandemic has accelerated the change already being seen in many post-industrial areas, with a shift away from ‘making and manufacturing’ to future-facing industries, such as the creative and digital sector, robotics and artificial intelligence, carbon capture, the circular economy and life sciences and bioindustry. We propose a **Skills Catalyst programme**, investing in **Centres of Excellence** within Alliance Universities in partnership with LEPs/Combined Authorities, building on key elements of the new Institutes of Technology and replicating these in other institutions.

- Aligned to the growth sectors for that region, each Centre of Excellence would receive capital investment to develop state-of-the-art facilities, enabling upskilling and scaling-up of existing local businesses.
- Each Centre of Excellence would offer an educational skills pathway, developed in collaboration with industrial partners and local FE Colleges, with step-off points at levels 4-6.
- A novel addition to this would be specially developed ‘pivot’ programmes, designed to take the transferable skills of the existing workforce and reshape these to support the industries of the future.
- Providing access to education and upskilling in this way will tackle deep-rooted inequalities by enabling a wider section of society to experience the benefits of education and unlock their potential, whilst directly addressing the skills needs of the region, accelerating the ambitions of the Local Industrial Strategies and preventing additional unemployment.

### **4: Accelerating Entrepreneurial Ambition**

In addition to supporting local businesses to innovate and grow, Alliance universities instill and support the entrepreneurial ambition of their students and graduates. We propose **expanding incubator facilities and support** as part of the Centres for Excellence, particularly in sectors with higher rates of self-employment, such as the creative industries.

### **5: Applied and Translational Research Investment**

We cannot ‘build back better’ without levelling-up regions and cold-spot communities. As anchor-institutions, Alliance universities are well-placed and have the knowledge exchange maturity to harness research and innovation to support local economic development and productivity. Levelling up regions also means levelling up R&D across the UK. Aligned to our Centres of Excellence proposal, a place-sensitive approach and significant boost to applied research should be a key part of an R&D Roadmap. Alliance universities’ commitment to collaborative research and innovation includes support for early career researchers through our Doctoral Training Alliance, which has programmes tackling Grand Challenge areas set out in the

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Industrial Strategy. The R&D Roadmap needs clear strategies for attracting, as well as retaining, talent and improving diversity in talent pipelines.

The attached annex provides a brief overview of some of the ways Alliance universities are delivering activity that could be scaled-up through the high-level proposals we have presented. **Our members would welcome the opportunity to discuss these ideas further and work with government to develop more detailed proposals.** There are enormous challenges ahead, but we hope to work collaboratively with you to impart our extensive experience and knowledge to solve them.

Yours sincerely



Vanessa Wilson  
Chief Executive University Alliance



Professor Debra Humphris FRCP  
Chair University Alliance  
Vice-Chancellor University of Brighton

## Examples from University Alliance Members

### Industry placements and short-term KTPs

UA universities offer an extensive range of industry placements through modules or sandwich courses, summer internships, graduate internships, volunteering, and student consulting opportunities. The collective learning, experience, and connections to businesses through these schemes could be harnessed to inform detailed proposals on paid-internship opportunities for graduates. **Teesside University** currently funds around 40 paid graduate placements in SMEs, which run 12 weeks at different times of the year and are available to all graduates and postgraduates who are still looking to get established in the job market. **Coventry University** offers final term students the opportunity and support to be interviewed and selected by an employer to undertake an internship or consulting project. The **UWE Bristol** Graduate Internship Scheme provides up to £1,500 funding for employers to recruit UWE Bristol graduates on a ten-week project. **University of Greenwich** supports graduate internship opportunities with SMEs, paid graduate internships across its own campuses and funding for graduate placements through Santander Universities.

Examples of **short-term Knowledge Transfer Partnerships** include the KEEP+ programme, managed by **Anglia Ruskin University**. This is a partnership between six HEIs across four LEP areas (including three other UA members – **University of Brighton, University of Greenwich and University of Hertfordshire**). The Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise Network (KEEN) in the West Midlands, which involves two of our members – **Birmingham City University and Coventry University** – is based on the same principles and supports SMEs to increase their profitability and achieve growth through working with a regional university. The ability to focus on business-specific innovation over a shorter period will be vital for sustaining SMEs with the potential to innovate and grow. **Leeds Beckett University (LBU)** runs a Get Hired a programme run in conjunction with 48 local firms to match graduates to vacancies. The university runs the assessment centre programmes and feeds in the graduates who best fit their profile. LBU also runs the regional job fairs for the built environment/construction and digital industries and delivers a MBA scheme for training Council high fliers

### Supporting upskilling, re-skilling and business needs

All UA members work closely with their LEPs and Combined Authorities, putting them in a strong position to quickly guide targeted opportunities if additional funding is made available. **Birmingham City University** surveyed their employer contacts at the start of the crisis to take a needs-based approach to their direct assistance to businesses during this time. **Teesside University** has also surveyed businesses on the effects of the pandemic, in partnership with the Tees Valley Combined Authority.

There are several ways UA universities are adapting and accelerating their business support during the Covid-19 crisis. **UWE Bristol** has quickly repurposed a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) grant and launched a £1m Digital Innovation Fund to support SMEs to innovate and address new challenges that have arisen during the crisis. The **University of Hertfordshire**, Hertfordshire Growth Hub and the Hertfordshire LEP have devised the Volunteer Business Support Scheme, a network of volunteers from business backgrounds with experience of managing or coaching at a strategic level, providing support to businesses that are either critically distressed or experiencing new demands as a result of Covid-19. **Teesside University** is providing free Digital Skills for Growth training, a programme of online accredited courses for public, private and voluntary sector workers and a mentoring service to Tees Valley learners and SMEs to help their employers gain maximum benefits from their upskilling. Professor Peter Slee, Vice-Chancellor of **Leeds Beckett University**, chairs a Leeds City Council-sponsored anchors programme designed to level up the city. Fourteen major organisations with a combined turnover of £2bn and employing one in seven of the city's workforce are working in partnership to grow the city's economy and to ensure that more benefits flow to the six most deprived wards in the city. Together, they have increased purchasing in Leeds from 20% of total discretionary spend to 50% in just two years. In partnership with Kingston Chamber of Commerce, students at **Kingston University** have delivered online consultancy and support for local businesses to overcome problems during the pandemic as part of a virtual hackathon.

### **Supporting entrepreneurial ambition**

The **University of South Wales'** Startup Stiwadio, which has many tenants based in the creative industries, has moved its incubator bootcamp online to help graduate entrepreneurs to start their own businesses in a challenging market. **Oxford Brookes University's** Enterprise Support works with students, staff and graduates to be entrepreneurial through webinars, advice clinics and 1:1 support. The university is currently working with Santander and Innovate UK on the Catalyst Artificial Intelligence (AI) Start-Up Accelerator. This scheme is a launchpad for growing start-ups that are incorporated, managed or owned by Oxford Brookes students, graduates or staff, who want to identify and deploy a plan for using AI in their business and work on the application for Innovate UK Small Grants. **Teesside University** graduates, students and staff looking to start a new business venture can gain access to 18 months of structured mentoring, support, workshops, and office space through their Teesside Launchpad. **Coventry University** uniquely offers the only UK example of a social enterprise set up by a university to promote social entrepreneurship and innovation benefitting the local community and achieving true social value: [CU Social Enterprise](#). The university's role as a social innovator extends to supporting students, alumni, staff and the local community at various stages of their entrepreneurial journey. These are just some of the examples of business incubators where learning could be harnessed, and facilities expanded.