

Speech by Rt. Hon David Willetts MP at the 2012 Queen's Anniversary Prizes Banquet at Guildhall, City of London

Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellencies, my Lords, ladies and gentlemen. Our Colleges and Universities are at the heart of our national life. They are known and respected throughout the world. It's a real pleasure to be with you at this celebration of one of our country's great institutions.

I've travelled quite a long way to join you here this evening: only yesterday I was in the Falkland Islands; the day before that I was at the Rothera research station, on the western side of the Antarctic peninsula.

And in the Antarctic I met researchers and academics from our great higher education institutions, including Universities represented here this evening: I met a PhD student from Birmingham University, which is recognised tonight; I met University researchers who had had the brilliant idea of taking some of the shellfish collected by Captain Scott, a hundred years ago, now in the Natural History Museum, and taking the same species of shellfish today and comparing the carbon content of the two sets of shellfish to show how carbon dioxide was changing the natural environment. It was a reminder of the value of the research which our great Universities conduct, and which is celebrated at this event this evening.

As well as the Antarctic, there is of course another cold, isolated place that many researchers visit some time in their careers: Grantarctica, an empty land, where project funding is impossible to come by! It's a tough environment, but this Government's commitment to science and research is to ensure that our talented and imaginative academics spend the least possible time on that lonely Continent.

Everywhere I went on my journey in the last few days had, it seemed, already been visited by members of The Royal Family; notably, Her Royal Highness Princess Anne. She had of course been to the Falkland Islands, but Your Royal Highness had gone further: I found a plaque in the Antarctic

wilderness saying, “This time capsule of the British Antarctic Survey, Rothera Research Station, was placed beneath this rock by Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal in January 2007; to be opened in the year 2107”, when these Anniversary Prizes will of course be celebrating their one-hundred-and-fifteenth year.

In fact, looking around this rather grand gathering this evening, I feel rather as if I still were out in the Antarctic, looking upon a colony of particularly distinguished penguins; very distinguished, meriting the close personal attention of David Attenborough. But there is a far more important journey for us to reflect upon today: the journey made by our higher education institutions in the two decades since these awards were launched, to mark the Queen’s fortieth Jubilee year. And, over the span of these years, the scale of change has been astonishing: back in 1961, there were three-hundred-and-thirty thousand students at UK higher education institutions; 1971, that was up to six-hundred-and-twenty thousand; in 1991/92, when these Prizes began, one million three-hundred thousand; twenty years later, 2011, two million five-hundred thousand students at UK Higher Education institutions.

And this expansion has been achieved without in any way sacrificing standards. Kingsley Amis’s notorious claim in 1960, that more will mean worse, has been proven wrong: on the contrary, more means diversity; more means opportunity; more means a wider mix of disciplines fostering fresh links between subject areas; and more means towns and cities growing in stature thanks to the great institutions in their midst. That is precisely what we are celebrating here at the Guildhall this evening.

As the Jubilee brochure explains, The Queen’s Anniversary Prizes have gone to some sixty-seven Universities and thirty-eight colleges of further and higher education: medicine, music, mathematics, social work, plant breeding, paper conservation; over the years, the Trustees have judged Universities and Colleges to have had a major impact in each of these areas and many more besides.

The twenty-one Prize recipients for this Diamond-Jubilee Round, whom

we celebrate this evening, include world-class computer animation at Bournemouth University; life-changing employment support for people with mental health problems, at Hackney Community College; practical solutions for making water safe to drink from, at the University of Surrey, at which His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent is Chancellor. Ours is a system where all these institutions, and many more, make a tangible difference.

There are challenges facing the sector, of course: one is a national affliction, that habit of turning diversity into hierarchy. It's quite right that tonight's awards should honour further education Colleges alongside Universities. There's another challenge as well: preserving the autonomy of our Universities. I'm very well aware that, traditionally, University leaders are less than keen on Governments telling them what to do. In the early twentieth century, when the board of Education requested institutional data on staff teaching hours, the Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield complained, and I quote, "nothing so un-gentlemanly has been done by the Government since they actually insisted on knowing at what time Foreign Office clerks arrived at Whitehall"; so the Board of Education dropped its request.

And I'm absolutely certain that the higher education sector will continue to demonstrate, and here I refer back to what is in the brochure this evening, "transformational impact and benefit". I welcome this, but of course academics must be free to pursue blue-skies research. And sometimes it's the blue-skies research that has an impact far greater than anyone can foresee; we in Government fully understand the difference between a University and a sausage machine.

Let me close with one final challenge, and another challenge which this event goes some way to overcoming: too often in this country we focus on students, or academics, or even, dare I say it, Vice-Chancellors, and overlook the inestimable value of the institutions themselves. Tonight we are celebrating Universities as institutions; and we are truly privileged that another of our greatest institutions, our Monarchy, should be celebrating the success of our higher education that is so important to our country. Thank you very much indeed.