

# The Rt Hon John Denham MP

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## **INCREASING THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN RAISING STEM ATTAINMENT IN SCHOOLS**

Following my speech to the HEFCE conference on 8 April 2008, I'm grateful that you have agreed – with Professor John Coyne – to look at one aspect of the higher education widening participation agenda which I consider of strategic importance to the UK. I hope this will, in turn, form a key part of the wider debate I am keen to see take place across all aspects of Higher Education. I am pleased you have already begun to discuss this issue with officials here in DIUS, and I welcome your initial thoughts scoping out areas for potential investigation.

The role of HEIs is critical in ensuring fairness in the opportunities available to young people in the maintained sector, and on which I see a need for universities to work more closely with schools in supporting improvements to teaching and also aspirations to take up STEM careers. I hope that if they can help strengthen school science, universities will contribute directly to the widening participation agenda.

I appreciate that the primary aims and characteristics of many of our world-class research institutions may not at first sight appear suited to the needs of young people, but the expertise, facilities and personal enthusiasm found in universities is a resource that is relevant and is already being tapped in helping enthuse schools and children about the huge benefits of HE.

Steve Smith will no doubt have some important messages for us about university links with young people across all disciplines, but I have a particular interest in STEM. There is much already happening where universities play a positive role, such as their staff taking part in the Science and Engineering Ambassadors scheme. But in looking to the future, I would like you to make recommendations on two key issues:

- What more can universities offer to enhance their impact on STEM for young people?

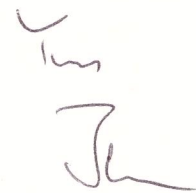
- How can universities improve their existing involvement with schools?

I'm most interested in tangible signs that the whole HEI sector is being motivated to make this kind of outreach work a major plank of their business. I'd welcome your ideas on what would constitute success here, from the perspective of universities and also schools. On both of these questions, the usual measures around GCSE, A-levels, and applications to university will show differences in national and regional trends, and I'd like you to consider specifically how universities can more effectively help improve the outcomes in the following areas:

- Choices at 14 – 16, and the influence of double award vs triple science GCSE
- Choices post-16, the effect of A-level provision in physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics
- Degree choice, and the existing influence of HEIs over schools, especially on local communities
- The role mathematical capability plays in providing a strong basis for success in studying STEM at university

I am keen that you work closely with others in this area, particularly the work of Steve Smith on widening participation more generally, the current activities of Universities UK, the work of John Holman (national STEM director), BERR and DCSF.

I would welcome your initial thoughts by mid-July, which I appreciate is a challenging timetable. I'd hope you can then deliver your considered views by September. That timetable will enable me to take full account as I develop the future agenda for the Department.



**JOHN DENHAM**