I am delighted to be in St Petersburg in the year it celebrates its tercentenary. St Petersburg was built to be Russia’s “Window on Europe”. It has always been a truly international city, right down to the materials used for its construction shipped in from across Europe. I am told the first merchant ship to dock at the Peter and Paul Fortress was Dutch. You cannot win them all. At least the second and third were British. So I hope that what we lacked in speed, we made up for in quality.

In *Eugene Onegin*, Alexander Pushkin captured the essence of our historic relationship.

"Whatever for caprice of spending/ Ingenious London has been sending / Across the Baltic in exchange for wood and tallow."

In this tercentenary year, there has been a host of events under the "UK @ St Petersburg" banner, many here, many in the United Kingdom.

So it is entirely fitting that this week's conference, which brings together some three hundred participants from thirty-two countries and representatives of the most important international donor agencies working in this region, should be staged here in St Petersburg.

It is my great pleasure to welcome the representatives of no fewer than twelve ministries of education, forty-two universities, and the leaders of many of the most successful education reform projects. I am also very glad to welcome colleagues from the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, UNESCO, Tempus TACIS, the Eurasia Foundation, the OECD, the Goethe-Institut, KulturKontakt and Bureau CROSS. For the British Council this conference is the highlight of our contribution to St Petersburg's tercentenary celebrations.

Integration for Impact is the central event in a series of three conferences, which started last year in Prague and will conclude in Belgrade next year. The series gives us all the chance to reflect on what has been achieved in education reform across Europe in the past decade - as well as to learn from other organisations, and discuss future opportunities for partnership.

Many of you present will know about the English language textbooks piloted in a number of countries in the region and then disseminated further by the Open Society Institute and the World Bank. These textbooks are now in the classroom of every school in Russia. I am sure that, as a result of this conference, new initiatives will spring up and lead in their turn to new partnerships between organisations and between countries.

Education reforms across Eastern and Central Europe have a strategic value both for the individual countries and the region as a whole. We all have to give our citizens the skills necessary to thrive in a market economy. Better education brings better life opportunities for the future citizens of a democratic Europe.
A great deal has already been achieved in Europe: we have seen the introduction of modern curricula, the re-thinking of assessment systems, the training of new generations of teachers, and strategic changes in education management and legislation. All of these make vital contributions to meeting the expectations of students, parents and employers in the twenty-first century. The organisations and governments present at this conference have a share in this success.

I am pleased also that we have been able to forge such a strong partnership with the Ministry of Education in the Russian Federation, founded on a formal agreement signed by the two governments in 1994. We are co-operating and exchanging experience in a wide range of areas, including competence-based curricula, social inclusion, education management, and leadership. The result of these projects can be seen not just here in St Petersburg, but across the whole Russian Federation. The benefit flows in both directions, and I am confident that our partnership will grow further.

I would like to thank our colleagues from the Ministry of Education in Serbia for sending such a high-level delegation and making such a big contribution to the programme of this conference. I'm also grateful for the support of our own Department for Education and Skills in the UK, which has made such a strong commitment to this series of events. And I'd like to thank all the organisations that have contributed to this conference – in particular the World Bank, the Open Society Institute and the ministries of those participating countries that have sponsored participants.

In the British Council, our work in education lies at the heart of our purpose. Developing young people who can grasp opportunity and engage with their peers in other cultures is for us the greatest of prizes.

This is vital work. If we succeed in what we are trying to accomplish, all our children will live and move freely in a prosperous, tolerant and well-educated Europe. They will be able to meet the challenges facing them with understanding, competence and dignity.