

Students lacking 'real life' experience, warns Willetts

Many students are ill-prepared for the world of work because degrees such as science and engineering are being "delivered on paper" without real life experience, the Universities Minister has warned

Courses in practical subjects are often too theoretical and appear to have "lost touch with the reality of modern business", according to David Willetts.

In an interview with the Telegraph, he outlined radical plans designed to raise standards in core disciplines such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) that are seen as vital to the economic recovery.

It will be announced tomorrow that ministers are investing almost £8m in a new £32m link-up between Coventry University and the manufacturing firm Unipart to create a "faculty on the factory floor".

In the first move of its kind, a new university department will be built at the company's Coventry base, allowing 110 students a year to take their degree and lead research using the company's facilities.

The Coalition is also making £200m available – backed by a further £200m of private finance – to upgrade laboratories and engineering departments at universities across England.

Speaking before the announcement, Mr Willetts said: "You don't need to teach philosophy on the factory floor. But many university courses are directly aimed at the skills that you need to work in industry and some of these courses have lost touch with the reality of modern business.

"These plans bring them back together so that students are more employable."

Business leaders have repeatedly warned that too many students are leaving university without the vital job skills needed



David Willetts, the Universities Minister, said students were unable to develop vital work skills in subjects such as science and engineering.

to get by the workplace.

Research last week showed that 59 per cent of employers believed there was a shortage of graduates with higher-level qualifications in the STEM subjects needed to meet the requirements of British industry.

Mr Willetts insisted that job hunters with a degree were significantly more likely to find work than those without university qualifications, but he warned that some degrees lacked a practical edge, adding: "Some of our courses have been delivered too much on paper with insufficient real life experience".

"Why is it that our engineers sometimes end up in the City? One reason is that sometimes they have been taught in quite a theoretical type of way," he said.

"Now I am not blaming universities for this because part of the problem has been that there hasn't been the budget for modern equipment. That's the core problem we have to solve."

Mr Willetts said he recently spoke to a German power company executive with experience of hiring staff in both Germany and Britain, asking him to explain the difference between graduates from the two countries.

"They both know the principles of engineering, they have both studied the same textbooks and reached the same standard," he said. "The difference is that the German graduate would be put in charge of one of their facilities almost overnight and they wouldn't do that with the British graduate because they haven't had enough

practical experience."

This week, the Department for Business will spearhead a new campaign – Make Your Future Happen – designed to raise awareness of the benefits of a higher education.

The partnership between Coventry University and Unipart, which designs components for the automobile, rail and air industries, will be launched in September 2014, teaching 90 undergraduate and 20 postgraduate students.

John Latham, Coventry's deputy vice-chancellor, said: "You've had links between businesses and universities before, normally resulting in the construction of a new building on the university campus. This is the first time the university institute has been built at the factory."