

## DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Can the further education system deliver the skilled people the economy needs?

Held at The Royal Society on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2011

The Foundation is grateful for the support for this meeting from  
The City and Guilds Institute of London, the Institution of Agricultural Engineers,  
The Michael John Trust, The Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 and Wm Morrisons.

**Chair:** **The Earl of Selborne GBE FRS**  
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology

**Speakers:** **Philip Greenish CBE**  
Chief Executive, The Royal Academy of Engineering  
**John Hayes MP**  
Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education  
**Dr Claire Craig CBE (representing the Minister in the discussion)**  
Director of Skills, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education  
**Amarjit Basi**  
Principal and Chief Executive, Walsall College

**Respondent:** **Mr Norman Pickavance**  
Group HR Director, Wm Morrisons

MR PHILIP GREENISH said that the UK engineering sector employed 4.5 million people, accounted for almost 20 per cent of UK GDP and contributed 53 per cent of the UK's export earnings. Recent studies had shown that UK manufacturing was likely to need some 580,000 new workers by 2017 and that there was a pressing need for upgrading the skills of the workforce especially in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) areas. In recent years there had been some welcome increase in the uptake of STEM subjects at GCSE and 'A' levels, although that overall increase masked a worrying decline in certain areas such as computing. He went on to point out that Further Education (FE) had been the Cinderella sector of education. It was large and diverse but had been underfunded. In England there were 4.7 million learners in FE and 5,000 registered providers of FE. In the UK there were 425 FE colleges (nearly four times the number of Higher Education (HE) institutions). Some 9,000 qualifications in STEM subject areas were available to FE learners but it was very difficult for learners and employers to get adequate information about what was available and how to chart a coherent and advantageous career path through that maze. Although there was a reasonable spread of STEM qualifications both by level and by discipline, the preponderance of enrolments was at Levels 1 and 2 whereas in many other EU members states there was greater emphasis on Levels 3 and 4.

There was a worrying decline in the number of FE teachers in STEM subjects. If the FE sector was to be able to meet the UK's needs for the skilled workforce required to sustain economic growth, there needed to be greater emphasis on higher level skills, more enrolments in STEM subjects (especially among those over 19 years

old), greater numbers of high quality teachers, funding incentives to encourage progression to Level 3 and above, and greater input from employers to assist FE providers to cater for the qualifications valued by employers.

MR JOHN HAYES noted with regret that the UK traditionally tended to overemphasise HE and to undervalue FE and the importance of practical skills. The fact that FE was different from HE did not mean that it was in some ways inferior.

Practical and technical skills, and not just academic skills, were essential for the prosperity of the UK as well as for personal development. He wanted to see much closer participation between employers and FE providers so that the latter could focus on what the former and their employees really wanted. He wanted to see the FE sector freed from the bureaucracy which crippled its ability to respond to those wants. He wanted to see a change in public attitudes towards the value placed on and the prestige attached to practical skills and competences. Finally he wanted to encourage a perception that learning was a lifelong continuum with clear pathways and progression available in the technical and practical areas comparable to those available in academic areas.

MR AMARJIT BASI gave an inspirational account of developments and achievements at Walsall College in recent years. The college saw itself as key to the prosperity of the community in which it was located and believed that it was a source of civic pride. Working closely with local employers (which included engineering, utilities and sport) it sought to focus its courses on

providing the skills needed for the future of those local companies and to support apprenticeship programmes for age 14 upwards. It aimed to equip its students to be skilled, professional and enterprising. It had obtained award-granting status – something which had proved to be highly stimulating and attractive to the teaching staff. It had a flourishing Sixth Form entirely devoted to the achievement of vocational Level 3 qualifications. It had a growing intake of overseas students, making it a major exporter. He attached importance to working closely with HE so that its FE programmes could provide a valuable bridge between schools and HE institutions.

Introducing the first discussion period MR NORMAN PICKAVANCE stressed the importance of commerce and industry getting much closer to education and playing a bigger role in determining what education provided. He saw education as a continuum assisting people to progress from shop floor to top floor. He believed that commerce and industry had a key role to play in enhancing the success of FE and in ensuring that the public celebrated its successes.

In the discussion periods there was a widespread welcome for the fact that the Foundation had judged FE of sufficient importance to make it the theme of one of its dinner discussions. There was also widespread support for the key themes contained in the presentations – the importance of progression, of lifelong learning, of close collaboration between FE colleges and employers and of raising the status of FE.

There was some speculation about the impact on FE of the major changes taking place in the funding of HE. Some speakers saw this as providing an important opportunity for FE to project itself as an alternative pathway for young people to take towards the eventual attainment of qualifications at degree and post-degree level. The renaissance of apprenticeship schemes could assist in this by providing a good entry point to the ladder of progression.

One or two speakers were concerned that the emphasis given to the acquisition of qualifications at Level 3 and above might lead to an undervaluation of skills at Levels 1 and 2. But it was pointed out that all levels had value and that the important thing was to foster aspiration to move on to higher levels and to ensure that such progression was not impeded by bureaucratic or funding constraints.

There were plenty of voices to urge the need for a simplification of the funding arrangements for FE. The lack of adequate time horizons and the existence of more than one funding stream imposed serious impediments for those in FE seeking to plan and provide for the future.

Some speakers expressed concern about the low level of interest shown by girls in STEM subjects. It was pointed out that the task of encouraging girls to aspire to success

in STEM areas was not for FE providers alone. The whole STEM community had a part to play.

The consensus answer to the question set out in the agenda for the evening was that FE had the potential to deliver but that it could not do it on its own. FE needed the help and involvement of commerce and industry to guide it towards the required goals. FE needed the support of the public to realise the importance economically and socially of practical and technical skill, especially craft skills. FE needed the help of the Government in simplifying the funding regime for FE, in removing unnecessary regulatory impediments and, above all, in providing continuity (especially at ministerial level) and stability.

Sir John Caines KCB

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[www.cityandguilds.com](http://www.cityandguilds.com)

Consultation document on skills  
[www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/f/10-1070-fe-funding-consultation](http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/f/10-1070-fe-funding-consultation)

Consultation response  
[www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/s/10-1276-simplified-fe-funding-response](http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/s/10-1276-simplified-fe-funding-response)

Consultation on skills conditionality -  
[www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/skills-conditionality-consultation.pdf](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/skills-conditionality-consultation.pdf)

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills  
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