

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

How should technical skills training be supported?

Held at The Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG
on Tuesday 19th November 2002

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EMTA

In the Chair: The Rt Hon the Lord Jenkin of Roding

Speakers: Mr Michael Stark

Head of Skills and Workforce Development, Learning and Skills Council

Dr Geraldine Kenney-Wallace

Director E-Strategy, City & Guilds

Mr Ivan Lewis MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DfES

MR. STARK set out the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) sector based approach to raising skills. The LSC's vision was that by 2010 the UK workforce would have knowledge and productive skills matching the best in the world. But we had a long way to go – at present we were near the bottom of the developed countries league – e.g. our percentages of the workforce who had been in learning in the last three years – 70% of 20 to 24 years old, 50% of 25 to 34 years old, and 47% of 35 to 44 years old – were well below those of our competitors. The problem was not just new entrants; it was the whole workforce. Employers would pay for knowledge and skills which enabled adults to participate effectively in the workplace, but only after the state had delivered basic skills through schooling. He contrasted the £2.5bn spent on 200m training days through FE Colleges with the £15bn spent by employers on 50m training days; why the disparity in outcome? Specific LSC targets were to improve basic literacy and numeracy to be 0.75m by 2004 (1 in 5 of the workforce were illiterate); provide 1m more adults with Stage 2 skills by 2007; ensure 40% fewer adults lacked Stage 2 skills by 2010. These targets were not achievable unless demand was stimulated by persuading employers of resulting productivity benefits and employees of benefits to jobs and progress. At present supply was there (although it could be improved) but demand was not. Success depended on getting the balance right between funding by the state, the employer and employees; encouraging saving and borrowing for learning; engaging the commitment of SME employers; ensuring flexible but good qualifications; and developing sectoral and local strategies within the national agenda.

DR. KENNEY-WALLACE stressed the importance of the service sector (75%), which included both financial

and public services, but, crucially, a high proportion of SMEs, whose first priority was survival in a harsh world, but who often did not recognise that survival meant a trained, and therefore productive, workforce. Until they did, we would not get the volume of training that we needed. But to gain their commitment, such employers must understand training provision and the benefits to themselves. Key tasks were greater transparency and clarity in provision, and deeper understanding of individual business requirements – employers did not have one voice, but many. Within any business itself flexible skills were needed to operate in different roles. Present training programmes needed to be matched to sound, flexibly delivered, properly assessed, and portable qualifications. Employers would then know how to pick and promote employees and would not curtail training when business needs changed. Supply, therefore, must be flexible enough to cope with demand led changes. We had to understand why demand was so weak in many vocational areas where training could yield good incomes (e.g. plumbing). Big business could help by encouraging SMEs in the supply chain.

MR. IVAN LEWIS said that the policies in the Government's new skills delivery strategy must follow the perceptions of gains and losses by employees and employers. The strategy itself was built around local strategies and concentrated on areas and issues which were perceived to add value. Increasing the supply of trained science technicians was one. He was aware that there were too many bodies involved in supply; insufficient transparency; and sector and regional disparities. Qualifications must meet the needs of employers, who should be expected (but not forced) to do much more. They had to be persuaded that a relevant qualification meant a better employee with a higher productivity. Sector by sector, the economic

rewards to both employer and employee needed to be emphasised. We know that the UK lag in productivity derives significantly from inadequate investment in skills. The government's initiatives on Foundation Degrees, specialist schools, new Technical Institutes and Centres of Vocational excellence were a start, but much more needed to be done – e.g. to boost high quality, high status modern apprenticeship; to get acceptance that learning is life long and not just for the young; and to get vocational GCSEs accepted as the equal, not the poor relation, of academic GCSEs. RDAs and the LSCs must work together to ensure regional coherence and a common strategy.

As in other Foundation meetings concerned with tertiary education, a principal concern of a number of speakers in the following discussion was the nature and failings of secondary, and to some extent, primary education. From an early age, there was a failure to engage girls in becoming interested in technical and vocational matters except those thought to be suitable for them – e.g. hairdressing. But the most severe problems arose in secondary schools where the system seemed to be obsessed by the academic/vocational split and to regard vocational qualifications as being inferior to others. Teachers and career advisers did not take sufficient account of employability which meant they often gave pupils the wrong advice – pushing them towards academic courses which would not, in the long term, yield such satisfactory and well paid employment as vocational work. There was concern that the 14 to 19 year review had lost impetus, and speakers emphasised the importance they attached to this review and the need for it to develop a strategy which would integrate academic and vocational learning, rather than treating them as two separate streams. It must also recognise that education is a continuous process from primary to tertiary, and not, as so many studies and reviews did, view its particular subject in isolation. It was important to focus on the 50% who don't do GCSEs, and who, in many cases, have dropped out of the school system before 16, because they could not see the point of the academic courses they were forced to follow, and had not been given sufficient guidance to develop their vocational skills. A culture shift was needed in schools which would treat academic and vocational learning as of equal value, and to ensure that all children had a chance to experience good teaching in both areas. Only a widely based education would lead to all round competence in life and increase the chance that the individual would find the spark that led to achievement. In particular, a step change was needed with girls.

Speakers were also concerned about the quality and relevance of training provided by FE Colleges. Why was it that employers were not making greater use of them? Did not the disparity in pay between lecturers in FE Colleges and 6th Form teachers show that the Government did not really understand the need to give FE Colleges greater status? Reference was made to the government's statement that day on FE Colleges, which promised increased funding, review of lecturers pay, closer liaison with LSEs, reduced bureaucracy, and a closer look at the quality of various institutions. The best would be given greater freedoms; the more

challenged greater help. This was welcomed, but there was still unease about whether the government's overall policies on FE and HE were consistent: how did the 50% target for HE fit in with the national need to improve vocational training, better done at FE Colleges? It was argued, however, that aims were not inconsistent; there was room for increasing participation at both FEIs and HEIs. The challenge was to give every individual the chance to go where he would be best suited, and to bring HE and FE closer together so that there could be more flexible provision and transfer between them. Again, it was vital to stop thinking that FEIs were a consolation prize for those not sufficiently gifted to go to HEIs.

Further speakers were concerned with the significant number in the workforce who was illiterate or innumerate. Even if the LSC achieved its targets there would still be large numbers who were so disadvantaged – after all there were 7m of such workers. Much more investment needed to be made to cope with this problem. This in itself raised the question of whether the traditional taxonomy - education the responsibility of government; training that of the employer; and development that of the individual - was any longer right. Were they now not intermixed? If the government failed to provide education so that a worker was illiterate, the employer had to help him if he were to become a productive worker, and he had to be induced to accept that training meant better pay; if an employer failed to provide training the combined resources of the employee and government needed to be brought into play. An important factor was the influence of role models, which could demonstrate the advantages of training and learning. Somehow we needed to show young people that Beckham did not just get there by natural ability; he needed both personal hard work and skilled training.

Finally, there was concern that the emphasis on the young was not giving sufficient importance to training, or retraining the more mature workforce, which, as Mr. Stark's figures showed, were those most lacking in training. They as much as others needed to learn the skills which would enable them to transfer from one task to another (in the graphic example of one speaker, from a hamburger griller to as forklift truck operator) as the business needs of his employer changed. We also needed to take account of the increasingly strong wish of workers to be able to change from doing something which they might be good at, to something they really wished to do. If this could be done, there was a source here of creativity and innovation which could be of great value to the economy.

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield

The discussion was held under the Foundation's Rule that the speakers may be named but those who contribute in the discussion are not. None of the opinions stated are those of the Foundation which maintains a strictly neutral position.