

Speech to The Foundation for Science and Technology on 2nd March, 2011

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“FE – What is the future for non-graduate training in the UK?”

[2,256 words]

Thank you Dougal and good evening everyone.

The topic of your debate tonight is an important one – indeed, it encompasses some of the most important questions facing our education system today.

I must begin by apologising especially to my fellow-speakers Philip and Amarjit, for the fact that I must leave for another engagement after I've spoken. Such is the life of a Government Minister, I'm afraid.

However, I'm very pleased to have a most able deputy in the form of Dr Claire Craig, my Department's Director of Skills, who has kindly agreed to represent me in your discussions later on. I hope you will give her a warm welcome.

At the risk of sounding like an American President giving the State of the Union address, the first thing that I want to make clear tonight is that the future of non-graduate training in this country is strong.

In recent years, and still in some parts of the media and the political establishment, the focus has been on producing more and more graduates.

Now I don't think it's wrong to give as many people as possible the chance of a university education.

And I certainly don't agree with Francis Bacon that “universities incline men's wits to sophistry and affectation”.

Although I read that quote my quiet admiration for Bacon led me to doubt whether I should use it.

But I am sure that the myth that has become orthodox wisdom, the awful Liberal belief that the only form of prowess comes from academic accomplishment must be exploded.

It's also misguided to view our universities merely as factories for the higher-level employees of the future.

A university education is about far more than learning a skill. It's also about learning to live independently, to think for yourself, to challenge received wisdom and to get on with all kinds of people.

As Cardinal Newman wrote ‘it were well if English, like the Greek language, possessed some definite word to express, simply and generally, intellectual proficiency or perfection, such as ‘health’.... and ‘virtue...’

The annual survey of the first destinations of graduates shows that comparatively few of people – including scientists, by the way - make direct use of the subject-knowledge they have acquired when they enter the world of work.

Apart from human and veterinary medicine, architecture and a few other professions, the peculiarity of a degree is not a condition of entry to what are usually viewed as graduate careers. Many of us here tonight remember the milk-round, where prospective employers were usually looking mainly for the soft skills that higher education teaches, as well as the evidence of intellectual capability that a good degree provides.

Specifically vocational training usually comes later, offered by employers themselves on the job.

Many people saw, and still see, FE as a sort of safety-net for people not clever enough to get a university place. The source of a second-rate education for second-rate learners. It is curious to the point of being bizarre that the nation of John Ruskin and William Morris should have descended to believe that a practical taste or talent in a badge of failure for the 18 year-old who becomes an apprentice rather than an undergraduate.

I hope that such views make you as furious as they make me.

Among other things, the state of today's job-market exposes their falseness. A plumber with a level 3 Apprenticeship is not only more likely than an archaeology graduate to find a job quickly, but may well also have greater long-term earning potential.

And virtually all analysts and employer groups agree that the skills that will be needed to kick-start our economy and create renewed growth are predominantly around technician rather than first-degree level.

The conclusion that I draw from these facts is that it's time to bury once and for all the notion that FE is *inferior* to HE just because it's *different*.

FE has long-since earned its place in the sun, for its value to this country to be recognised and for those who work in it at last to be given the chance to show just how much they can do to improve the wellbeing of people, businesses and communities up and down the land.

It's high time that FE, too, was allowed to take its shoes and socks off and paddle in "the tide of pomp that beats upon the high shore of the world" as Shakespeare wrote in King Henry the Fifth.

Yes, I know that the need to reduce the deficit is affecting further education just as it is other areas of the public sector.

But that still doesn't mean that it can't look to the future with optimism.

The essence of the skills reform package that Vince Cable and I announced last November is not about how to spend money, or even how much money needs to be saved.

It's about building a nation which values learning and aspires to skill.

It is about elevating the practical.

A nation where everyone has the chance to enjoy the benefits that flow from learning, such as better health, more rewarding jobs and a greater sense of self-esteem, and where those benefits are passed on from one generation to the next.

It's about creating more open and inclusive communities and a society that is not just bigger, but better as well.

So I am going to speak about just a few ways in which the FE and skills system can help achieve that.

The first area of change is in colleges' economic role.

I know that FE colleges and other training providers are ready to deliver the skills needed for growth. But we can't expect them to do it on their own.

When my colleagues in Government or I say that we want employers to *lead* the skills system in future, rather than merely, as in the past, *advising* on its direction, no one in the further education sector should interpret this as a vote of no confidence in training providers.

Employers are the main customers for skills training in this country and also by far its major funders. The closer the links between the end-users of skills and those who provide them, the more satisfactory the system is likely to prove for everyone concerned.

That requires employers to get involved, to shape the training that the system offers and the qualifications to which it leads, so that they get the most from it.

It also requires colleges – and indeed, others, including the Government – not just to listen but actively to seek out employers' views on what they need, and respond to them.

Anything that hampers a college from responding to what its customers are telling it detracts from the effectiveness of the system as a whole. It short-changes local people and local business and strangles the abundant creativity of our magnificent FE teaching force.

When I became Skills Minister I found an FE sector that reminded me of the lost gardens of Heligan of Cornwall. Years of neglect made it hard to see that, through the undergrowth of petty rules and regulations that had been allowed to accumulate over time, it still remained a national treasure.

So, like the stoical gardener who knows that long years of hard work begin with the uprooting of the bramble which suffocates all that is beautiful, one of the very first things I did was to begin to hack away at the years of accumulated red tape that bound colleges.

We are still a long way from achieving the full flowering of the relationship between employers and skills providers that I would like to see. But the task of putting in place the right conditions for that symbiosis to be possible has already made great strides.

The second area of change I want to mention is one of perception.

I've already described the outmoded attitudes that see *training* as somehow inferior to *study* and which consider *thinking* a higher achievement than *doing*. And I've said many times before that I want to do something about that, to raise once again the status of manual skills and those who gain them.

We saw some great examples of how that is happened very recently during Apprenticeships Week.

My own wish to see Apprenticeships become a career-path of choice for young people and adults alike is being echoed by some of this country's largest employers. They recognise, as learners are also increasingly coming to recognise, that this form of training is perhaps the best way of passing on vocational skills that exists.

So when the Government says it will create an extra 75,000 adult Apprenticeship places during this Parliament – and also make more places available for 16-18 year-olds – it's heartening when big companies step forward to help ensure that jobs will be there for those extra trainees.

I can't move on without noting that Morrisons was one of the companies to announce additional posts during Apprenticeships Week and that one of the architects of that bold plan, Morrisons' HR Director, Norman Pickavance, is on the debate panel tonight. I am not an aficionado of supermarkets but I applaud his firm's commitment to Skills.

The fact that prestigious businesses recognise the value of Apprenticeships is important, and many of you will have seen that we are taking other steps to help make them a career-path to which people can aspire just as much as they can to a university degree, such as renaming the various levels of achievement to make them more meaningful, introducing graduation ceremonies and creating alumni networks..

I also want to make many more Apprenticeships available at higher levels, because I recognise that industry needs more at a higher skills level than ever before.

UKCES and the Technicians Council tell us that this is in the region of 50,000 more people.

If it had believed that, the previous Government would probably just have created an extra 50,000 training places at technician level. It never learned that trying to run a command economy for skills is about as effective as howling at the moon.

For our part, we are committed to helping industry and training providers to work together to meet that need locally and, in aggregate, at national level.

That should have particular resonance for those who depend on the so-called STEM skills.

For years we have heard complaints from employers and others about STEM skills shortages, combined with criticism from some sectors, notably pharmaceuticals, that what some STEM graduates have learnt at university is not always relevant to their business needs.

The advent of higher-level Apprenticeships gives STEM employers and others the chance to do something about that for themselves, by helping to train people to advanced skills levels on the job. I hope that many will seize that opportunity.

That's why I welcome the work of many partners in this room, led by the Royal Academy of Engineering, are already doing to ensure that prospective learners on accessing the right information and understanding how to map their careers as a Technician.

In a sense, the final area of change that I want to speak about takes me back to where I started. It's very easy to say that our economy needs x number of people qualified to y level.

If education were really a sausage machine, all we would have to do would be to push the right buttons to programme it and then stand back and congratulate ourselves.

But learning is not mechanistic. It's as unpredictable as the hopes and dreams of millions of learners. It can take huge leaps forward when a person realises that a certain course or qualification can be for them, too, or when a learner, after much effort, finally "gets it". Or it can grind to a halt when someone's hopes are disappointed or when they realise that they have reached a dead-end.

So the final and perhaps most important point that I want to make is that learning is a continuum.

When an adult completes their literacy course and experiences, probably for the first time, not just the joy of reading but the joy of learning, there should be nothing to which they should be unable to aspire.

There should be clear and easily-understandable route that can take them eventually wherever they want to go – to high academic honours, to professional or technical qualifications, or to a pottery evening-class in their local college.

Education is a powerful force for social and cultural as well as economic progress. It's about what we are not just what we do. But an education system that caps someone's aspirations – by saying, for example, that there is no clear route that can take a person from a level 3 Apprenticeship into university-level study – is the opposite of progressive.

A person left disappointed at the end of a course because, thanks to poor initial guidance, it has not taken them where it promised, has not had their life enriched by education, but blighted by it.

That is why my colleagues and I are putting so much effort into improving the progression-routes between the different levels and phases of learning. And it is why we set so much store by the new all-age careers service's ability to guide people accurately through and between them until they reach their goals.

The further education and skills system is what makes the very possibility of meaningful progression and truly lifelong learning real. It can take people from basic skills to higher learning. It can point the way – as it has done for someone like John McVicar – from the high-security wing to the college high table. It can lead from an informal basket-weaving class to the entry standard for a regulated progression. Or vice versa.

It is one of the keys to this country's social as well as economic future.

It is one of the forces that can make the depressed or disillusioned raise their heads once more and aspire to a better tomorrow.

It should be precious to us all. And whatever else emerges from your debate later on, I hope that this point comes through loud and clear.

The vocational route we are building must be a highway not a cul-de-sac.

A clear path from basic skills, all the way through to degree-level higher learning and above

A chance for everyone to reach their potential

Reigniting social mobility, and by so doing, spreading social justice.

That is my mission and the mission of this Government.