

**NEWSTATESMAN**

# HIGHER

## EDUCATION & SKILLS



# The right stuff: skills that work

The Leitch Review calls on universities to focus more on the needs of employers. It argues for higher levels of skills in order to provide a world-class workforce and recommends that the UK should have more than 40 per cent of the workforce qualified to level 4 or above (beyond A-level) in the National Qualifications Framework by 2020.

The response to this from the higher education sector has been somewhat guarded because student recruitment to courses remains the major driving force in the way that universities receive funding, as Simon Roodhouse explains (page 4); so, unsurprisingly, universities want to be able to design their own product.

The lament about the lack of skills in this country is nothing new, as noted by Peter Kingston (page 6), but our willingness to take to heart our apparent lack of skills is interesting when contrasted with our refusal to face the same when confronted with our nation's performance in sports.

A plethora of league tables and reports that place the UK near the bottom on practically every measure of skills could be something of a red herring, argues Sarah O'Connor (page 12) because, rather than simply boosting the volume of qualifications, we need to make sure people are getting qualifications that will be useful

in the workplace, something that other countries have got wrong. For many in the workplace, the word "training" brings on a feeling of dread. How much do people really learn from their training at work, asks Emily Mann (page 8).

Sir Digby Jones takes the view that, until we can get basic skills right, we will never truly be able to address the real inherent problems in British education, writes Anushka Asthana (page 14). Alison Wolf (page 16) argues that the Train to Gain model promises employers far more than it supplies because employees can be certificated for skills they already possess, rather than anything new they have learned.

Scientists have been warning for years that the shortage of specialist science teachers and decline in pupils taking A-level science is putting Britain's technological future at risk. Emma Lee-Potter (page 17) finds that driving young people into science needs to start at an early age if we are to capture their imagination.

The round table participants consider how higher education institutions can make themselves accessible to those with vocational qualifications (page 19) and discuss the types of qualification structures that will drive up skills in this country to match those of our global competitors.

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# Achieving balance

How can higher education contribute to the nation's need for more practical learning?

By Simon Roodhouse

In 2000, speaking as Secretary of State for Education and Skills, David Blunkett argued: "Higher education policy-making is now subject to new constraints caused by the rapidity of change, a situation unthinkable in the 1960s Robbins era. This change is related to the fundamental socioeconomic development of the last quarter of the 20th century: globalisation."

In 2006, Bill Rammell, current Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education said, in a round table discussion on practical learning: "There needs to be a cultural shift in the way universities respond to the world of work." He qualified this position: "I do not think anybody is saying we are going to move to a totally needs-driven model. People are still going to be doing subjects that are non-vocational right the way through the system up to university level. It is about getting the balance right."

It is this balancing that is set to dominate the future role of higher education in meeting the nation's need for more practical learning, with different universities engaging the new higher vocational learning agenda – particularly in workforce development – while others follow the traditional vocational and liberal education routes.

## Student recruitment

The market is not entirely "free", as government manipulates activity through funding initiatives delivered by its agency in England, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). However, student recruitment to courses based on campus remains the major driving force in university politics. In order to achieve this, universities have to respond to the demographic, social and economic environment that they are in at any given time, leading to the introduction of new courses, such as those in the creative industries, and the closure of others, including chemistry and physics. Individual universities must determine the market for the products they offer.

The operational drivers for university managers in giving consideration to meeting employer and employee learning needs are an ageing population with fewer school entrants to higher education year on year and a pressing need to up-skill the workforce. This leads us to further consideration of practical learning as the delivery mechanism.

If we turn to workforce development, hence practical learning, as a fertile ground

for higher education student recruitment, the corporate training market is valued at anywhere between £23.5bn (according to the Leitch interim report, *Skills in the UK: the Long-Term Challenge*) and £33.3bn (according to the Learning and Skills Council). Of this, it is assumed that about £16bn is spent by employers on external training resources – an average of £1,550 per employee per year. The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) estimates that, of the £16bn expenditure by employers, only £250m a year is spent in higher education. So, it is a market yet to be exploited. However, the difficulties for higher education are around the routes and mechanisms to enter and remain in the market.

Supply-side national policies, such as widening participation, and demand-side forces, such as employers' skills needs, as well as government policy pressures, will continue to push higher education towards closer dialogue with stakeholders. This may act as encouragement in certain areas to make greater use of employer standards and national occupational standards to equip students for work; it may also reduce the initial training burden on employers. More significantly, alongside an effective market entry mechanism, it provides the common language between employers and higher education that is so desperately needed.

The chances of practical learners





STOCKPRT/NARAFONIA

**There is no national qualifications framework capturing practical learning wherever it takes place. For a major developed country this is surprising**

actually attending university, despite having work-based qualifications that theoretically qualify them to do so, are low. Most university admissions tutors have little understanding that an advanced apprenticeship involves gaining the vocational equivalent of A-levels. However, approximately 25 per cent of young people currently follow the apprenticeship route, a substantial proportion of whom come from families in the lower socioeconomic groups

The sector needs a more responsive and developmental quality assurance system to support new initiatives. Assessment in the workplace and credit rating, for example, remain problematic in the current system. An unwillingness to combine standards, such as subject benchmarks and National Occupational Standards, to provide a relational model suggests that the quality assurance workforce development journey is proving to be a slow response to a fast-changing workplace.

### Foundation degrees

The relationship between higher education and further education will continue to impact on the balancing act between higher level practical skills delivery and employer engagement. With the introduction of foundation degrees and associated awarding powers, there is no doubt that further education colleges with the relevant capacity will develop higher level provision to meet local employer needs. Foundation degrees are intermediate, vocationally specific qualifications, awarded by UK higher education institutions with degree awarding powers. This qualification is seen as the higher education response to meeting the 2003, DfES Skills Strategy: "To ensure that employers have the right skills to support their businesses, and individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled."

There is a potential collision of interest – and a wasteful use of public resources – here, with further and higher education suppliers competing for the same

students. Should further and higher education merge to aid progression and provide an effective supply-side one-stop shop for employers? The signs are there, with partnerships between further and higher education well established and a shared employer engagement agenda. There is also a well-established tradition of vocationalism and practical learning in further education. With over 10 per cent of higher education delivered by further education on behalf of universities, there is confidence in the role of further education to provide this type of learning.

### Two-tier funding

The funding structure in England is provided by two agencies set up by the DFES, the Learning and Skills Council and the Higher Education Funding Council. Do we need two agencies acting independently? This confusion and wastefulness is powerfully illustrated in the qualification structure in the UK system.

There is no interconnection between the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) frameworks – there is no national qualifications framework capturing practical learning wherever it takes place. For a major developed country this is somewhat surprising.

In future, we may see one agency responsible for funding seamless learning at all levels, providing explicit progression for those in work to the highest levels, with research funding moved to the existing research councils to distribute. It is also possible to visualise a single national qualifications framework, using employer standards as its unifying component.

Universities need to spend more time considering the ultimate value proposition, as Roger Waterhouse suggested at the University Vocational Awards Council annual conference in 2002: "Not that they can teach, nor even that they can sell research, but that they can assess: they accredit learning and are awarding bodies. It is this social certification of successful learning that individuals, employers and ultimately society pay for."

*Professor Simon Roodhouse, University of the Arts, London, and Director, Safe Hands Management Ltd. His forthcoming book, Employers, Skills and Higher Education, Roodhouse, S. and Swailes, S. is published by Kingsham Press Chichester, ISBN: 978-1-904235-15-8*

# Prophecies of doom change nothing

We have never been able to get our technical education right – it's a national anxiety

By Peter Kingston



**Silvanus Thompson: compared English and French apprenticeships and found French students, "more methodical and intelligent in their work... more competent than the average workman at executing repairs"**

Whatever the real extent of our deficiencies in skills, there is one thing we in this country are quite good at. When it comes to making unfavourable international comparisons about the competence of our workforce, we play a blinder every time, unlike with sport.

Repeated disappointments never dampen beliefs that this time our national cricket or soccer team will triumph, whereas for a good century and a half we have been gulping down warnings of economic doom because our workers are less well trained than almost everyone else's.

The solution has not been found, nor has the sky fallen in. But that never deters the Jeremiahs. Lord Leitch's report on skills, though it seems to be stirring up more excitement than some of its predecessors, is, nevertheless, just the latest in a long line.

As to why we are not so well skilled as the other advanced economies, the consensus has it that we have never been able to get our technical education right. Somehow it has lacked the status, imagination and quality of others. The third arm of the tripartite system proposed in the 1944 Education Act, the development of technical and vocational schools, was never implemented, nor was compulsory education until 18.

## Historical comparisons

Even our apprenticeships have compared poorly with Continental models. Labour's enthusiasm to run with the last Tory administration's decision to revive apprenticeships can make you forget the poor comparisons made since the mid-19th century between our model and – yes, again – the schemes run by the French, Germans, Swiss et al.

After several cross-Channel forays in the 1870s to look at these, Silvanus Thompson, professor of physics at the then University College, Bristol and later principal of Finsbury Technical College, compared the stultifying drudgery of the English apprenticeship with the enlightened melange of theory and practice given in the French apprentice or trade schools. The French students were "more methodical and intelligent in their work... more competent than the average workman at executing repairs" because they had not merely been forced to plug away at one operation throughout long apprenticeships.

Thompson and others worked to improve vocational and technical education, and the last quarter of the 19th century saw a flowering of institutes and polytechnics for this purpose.

Decades later, many of these would morph into universities. A cynical view would have it that they grabbed the chance to bury their technical pasts. How much nicer to be called, for instance, the University of Surrey than Battersea Technical College, one of those late 19th century institutes which, among other things, trained men to build sewers.

## Vocations in universities

Whatever their differences, universities collectively cry foul at any accusation of welching on their vocational responsibilities, and with justification. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects, engineers are just some of the more obvious occupations requiring training in universities.

Since Thompson, with reliable regularity, calls have come from politicians, educationalists, industrialists and committees of all three for reform of British technical education. With similar regularity, employers have voiced their poor opinion of technical education, while their own unwillingness to make this good has been exhaustively noted. The 1927 Balfour Committee on Industry and Trade observed "a disquieting indifference on the part of employers" to training, an observation politicians still make.

New Labour can justifiably claim to have been first to put a serious shoulder to perhaps the worst legacy of the post-war education system, the large numbers of adults deemed functionally illiterate and innumerate. Aside from its focus on basic

skills, the complicated structures that New Labour set up to intervene in the training market, with the aim of improving the skills of the workforce, can be traced back to the early 1970s and the setting up of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC).

Though intended to revitalise vocational



training, pretty soon, under the pressure of recession and rising unemployment, this new quango was sidetracked by work creation schemes and training courses intended, as much as anything, to pull down youth jobless figures. It was the era of YOPS and TOPS – youth opportunities programmes and training opportunities schemes. Nonetheless, the MSC ploughed on. Two-year youth training schemes were developed to give 16- and 17-year-olds vocational training, in placements with employers, if possible. The NVQ – national vocational qualification – was invented, with industry setting standards.

But the critical shortage in the British workforce, compared with

much to say about higher education, the Leitch report makes one eye-watering recommendation – that the proportion of the adult population with skills at level 4 or above – about 29 per cent – is dragged up above 40 per cent. Strictly speaking, level 4 is the equivalent of the first year of an undergraduate degree.

Apart from questions about how expansion would be funded, what has set alarm bells ringing in universities is Leitch's assertion that expanding the government's higher education target, currently confined to 18-30 year olds, will

“transform the incentives of higher education providers to work with employers”.

Concerns that universities have failed to provide employers with work-ready graduates are not new. They led to the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) initiative, which ran from 1987 to 1996. But this, according to a subsequent appraisal for government, ‘changed the mindset’ of higher education institutions. They accepted that graduate employability was their proper concern and that careers issues should be treated more seriously.

The fear in universities post-Leitch is that employers will be given the dominant voice in deciding what courses they should run for adults, as is to happen in further education. Worse still, their requirements would be relayed via the sector skills councils, about whose usefulness there remains considerable scepticism.

The long history of British skills anxiety and the cyclical nature of government responses should, by now, offer us as much reassurance that the worst will not happen as misgiving that it will. If we are alarmed it is perhaps that excessive deference is to be paid to employers, until recently depicted by governments as unreliable in training matters. Maybe it is time for a reshuffle. Hand over vocational training to the ministry of sport.

*Peter Kingston is further education correspondent at the Guardian*

## The fear in universities post-Leitch is that employers will have the dominant voice in deciding what courses they should run for adults

major competitors, was in “intermediate” skills, a somewhat vague concept with widely different interpretations in different industries.

The Leitch report also voices concern about intermediate skills, adding that we have managed merely to “run to stand still”. We now need not only intermediate skills, the province largely of further education, but high skills.

Though it doesn't have



# All fired up by the training session?

What are we really learning from training?

By Emily Mann



STOCKPERY/ENDOSTOCK

By episode four in series one of *The Office*, David Brent has a disgruntled and disillusioned staff on his hands. In a bid to rally the troops, he organises a training day. Needless to say, he could run it himself – he’s been trained in training – but for a

change he calls in Rowan, who has an MBA from Bradford. Halfway through a team-building exercise involving a farmer, a fox, a chicken and a bag of grain (how can the farmer transport them all across the river, one at a time, without leaving the fox

## The A-Z of skills

By Sarah O’Connor

### A-LEVEL IN APPLIED SUBJECTS

Used to be known as vocational A-level. Now restructured and available in ten vocational areas (including engineering and leisure studies) at AS level, AS double award, A level and A level double award.

### ADULT/COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Formal or informal education for those over 19, often community-based.

### APPRENTICESHIP

On-the-job paid training, with days at college, available in over 80 industry sectors at different levels, and open to anyone aged 16 – 24 not in full-time education. Apprentices can earn NVQs and a technical certificate like a BTEC.

### BTEC

Vocational qualification offered by exam board Edexcel, at four levels: entry level (basic life and work skills), first level (equivalent to 2–4 GCSEs) national level (equivalent to 2–4 A-levels) and higher national (equivalent to 1–2 years’ full-time higher education).

### CITY & GUILDS

Britain’s largest awarding body for vocational qualifications.

### CREDIT SYSTEM

Way of awarding qualifications – a student will take modules worth a certain number of “credits”, and must amass 360 credits for an undergraduate degree, 120 for a certificate and 240 for a diploma.

### CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT

Vocational learning outside mainstream education – includes professional qualifications and workplace training.

### FOUNDATION DEGREES

Two-year degree-level qualification designed with employers, blending academic study with work experience. Applicants are assessed on prior work experience rather than qualifications.

### FURTHER EDUCATION (FE)

Education for over-14s that takes place outside of secondary school.

### GCSE IN VOCATIONAL SUBJECTS

Eight GCSEs are now offered in vocational areas: art and design; applied business; engineering; health and social care;

applied information and communication technology (ICT); leisure and tourism; manufacturing; and applied science. Replacing GNVQs, they are “double awards” (equivalent to two GCSEs).

### GNVQ

Being phased out in favour of vocational GCSEs, GNVQs were vocational qualifications equivalent to four GCSEs.

### HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

Above the standard of A-level or NVQ level 3, HE can be a degree or a BTEC Higher National Diploma. HE takes place in officially recognised institutions, such as universities and some colleges.

### INCREASED FLEXIBILITY PROGRAMME

Launched in 2001, the IFP enables 14–16 year-olds to spend one day per week at a local college, undertaking a vocational GCSE or NVQ. It aims to raise attainment and retention in post-16 education.

### KEY SKILLS

Qualifications (levels 1–4) in communication, application of number and information technology, available across all post-16 routes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These are assessed

with the chicken or the chicken with the grain?), Gareth despairs: “This is stupid... What are we learning from this?” His teammate Tim – so bored he’s on the verge of storming out of the room, and his job – retorts: “It’s not about learning. It’s just a problem to be solved.”

## Training not learning

Brent’s team may be training (after a fashion), but what they are learning, if anything, is another matter. The episode is tragicomic testimony that, in the typical workplace in Britain, training and learning are quite separate things, and that training has become a bit of a joke.

Indeed, training has turned into something of a dirty word in recent years, being less and less used in the business world. In a conscious shift from “training” to “learning”, what was once the training department has become the learning and development department; the training manager is now the learning and development director, and a whole host of organisations and schemes have labelled as “learning” what might in the past have been primarily training missions (Learning and Skills Councils, LearnDirect,

Unionlearn). Perhaps the very title of the government’s new Train to Gain programme (rolled out last year from the Employer Training Pilots) is partly to blame for the slow uptake so far.

On one level, the shift from “training” to “learning” is an attempt to alter perceptions, to lend the instruction of job-specific skills some of the prestige and gravitas of the development of wider knowledge. Yet it would be wrong to dismiss it as merely a semantic shift. This battle of words is, in fact, an expression of a battle of ideas that reaches back at least to the birth of comprehensive education (and rages on today) in which the academic has been pitted against the vocational, and qualifications against skills. Should education be directed towards emancipation or employment? And whose responsibility is it anyway?

## Employer motives

When businesses promote learning as opposed to training, their motives are often less to do with broadening the horizons of their staff than with making the process more proactive on the employee’s part – it becomes the worker’s

responsibility to learn, more than the company’s duty to train. It follows that, rather than employers being blamed for not training their employees enough, employers can blame employees for not learning enough. This is arguably a worrying trend when only one-third of employers currently provide any form of learning or training, much of it confined to basic requirements of the job (health and safety, customer care) – and especially worrying when alternative access to such opportunities, not to mention the skills truly to benefit from them, is so unequal. Moreover, the current direction of 14–19 education policy towards “work-related learning” and private provision, shaped by industry’s needs, signals an environment where employers will find it increasingly easy to pick up the workforce they want at others’ expense.

For once, *The Office’s* Gareth – like the rhetoric of business – is right: workers should always be learning, at the very least to prevent boredom setting in. If, however, they are made to learn in the name of profit and “flexibility” alone, they might feel better off working out how to save the chicken from the fox.

by examination; other “key skills” (working with others, improving own learning and performance, problem solving) are assessed through coursework.

### KEY STAGES:

The National Curriculum for children aged 5–16 is divided into four key stages. At the end of each stage pupils sit Standard Attainment Tests to monitor their progress.

### LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCIL

Responsible for planning and funding post-16 education and training for England outside of universities.

### LEITCH REVIEW OF SKILLS/SANDY LEITCH

Sandy Leitch is chairman of the National Employment Panel. In 2004, he was commissioned by government to undertake an independent review of the UK’s long-term skills needs. His final report, published in December 2006, recommended government make education or training compulsory up to the age of 18, and ensure that 95 per cent of British adults ought to have basic numeracy and literacy by 2020.

### NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Specifies what 5–16 year olds in state education are required to study.

### NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

Statements of the skills, knowledge and understanding needed in employment, defining the outcomes of competent performance. They are developed by representatives of employment sectors.

### NATIONAL SKILLS ACADEMIES

Employer-led centres of excellence training people in skills required by each major sector of the economy. Government aims to have 12 up and running by 2008.

### NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

Based on National Occupational Standards, NVQs test practical competence. They are assessed by observation and questioning.

### PEER MENTORING

Peer mentoring programmes are being piloted by 180 schools. Students mentor peers on issues including attainment, bullying, behaviour and transition.

### RUSSELL GROUP

Association of 20 major research-intensive universities; similar to the US “Ivy League”.

### SANDWICH COURSE

Higher education including a period of time in the work place. A “thick” sandwich

course involves a year’s work experience.

### SECTOR SKILLS COUNCILS

Independent, employer-led UK-wide organisations covering specific sectors of the economy. They have responsibility for skills and workforce development of all those employed in their sectors.

### SPECIALISED DIPLOMA

Centrepiece of the government’s 14–19 reforms, the diplomas will combine practical skills and academic learning. They will be available at three levels: level 1 for those not ready for GCSEs; level 2 will be the equivalent of five GCSEs; level 3 will be the equivalent of three A-levels.

### TOMLINSON REPORT/MIKE TOMLINSON

Chief inspector of schools (2000–2002) until he was commissioned by the government in 2003 to chair the Working Group for 14–19 Reform. His report (the Tomlinson Report, 2004) recommended replacing GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications with a diploma system. The government rejected his proposals.

### VOCATIONAL LEARNING

Education about a particular line of work rather than an academic subject area.

# Blinded by the numbers

Competing for a high ranking in the global league tables could be clouding our judgement about the skills we need  
*By Sarah O'Connor*



Sandy Leitch is a competitive man. His skills review is peppered with references to “the competition”: French workers are 20 per cent more productive than UK workers; we have twice as many unqualified people as Sweden; the US invests almost three times as much as we do in higher education (HE).

Preying on his mind more than anything, though, are the “international league tables” that rank OECD countries according to how well qualified their populations are. He sees it as a race: currently, we are 11th (of 30) in the “high qualifications” division, but other countries are running faster. Leitch reckons that by 2020, we’ll have caught up to where the US and Canada are today with over 40 per cent of over-25s possessing degree-level qualifications. By then, of course, the front-runners will be miles ahead.

But what are the stories behind these league tables? What can we learn from those who are outstripping us and, more fundamentally, is success in the league necessarily what it seems?

## More may be a surfeit

Take South Korea. In 1945 there was only one national university; now 81 per cent of South Korean school-leavers go on to higher education – the top rate in the world. This makes the country a high-flyer in Leitch’s international league, but does it mean the economy is getting the skills it requires?

After years of expanding higher

South Korea’s minister of education has declared a nationwide “crisis of over-education”



SHIRLEY HU/DREAMSTIME

formation and competitiveness, agrees. “There’s a problem of culture within UK firms – many of them don’t want high skills in employees. Lots of industries here don’t compete through the skills levels of their workforce, they compete by cost cutting.”

Leitch does recognise the dangers of ignoring employer demand. Indeed, he talks of switching to a “demand-led” system in HE, though is vague about exactly how this could be implemented.

Finland, near the top of the international league tables, has a very simple mechanism to make sure it doesn’t end up with the skills mismatches that South Korea is experiencing. All state-funded study places at universities are allocated according to labour-market needs: if the labour market needs more engineering graduates and fewer media studies graduates, then more engineering places are offered and the number of media studies places are reduced. This ensures that higher education works to the advantage of the economy, but does lead to a lengthy queuing system for those students determined to study less “necessary” subjects, such as the arts.

## Older workforce

Politically, implementing the Finnish system would be a tough sell in the UK. We could, though, learn a lot from Sweden’s approach, aimed at providing HE training to older people already in the workforce. This system meets Leitch’s desire to spread HE skills across the age groups. It also ensures supply doesn’t outpace market demand by making employers themselves responsible for initiating training. Employers pay for it (although they are given tax-breaks on all expenditures), and work with private institutions to design programmes that fulfil their needs. They obviously find it worthwhile: over 90 per cent of Swedish employers offer training, and spend a sum equal to 3 per cent of GDP on it. Employees, meanwhile, are subsidised by government grants and loans while they are on unpaid training leave, and are guaranteed the same or similar job on their return.

The UK has been piloting something similar – Train To Gain – to train employees at lower skills levels. Leitch has suggested adapting it to higher education. It could be a smart move. Instead of blindly boosting the volume of people with qualifications, we need to make sure people are getting the qualifications that employers need. As South Korea’s experience proves, tackling the skills agenda is more than just a numbers game.

education on the assumption that it would boost economic growth, South Korea has discovered that demand simply hasn’t expanded to meet supply. Only 56 per cent of university graduates get jobs straight away, and many are forced to fill jobs below their skill level. With intense societal pressure to attend academic higher education institutions, real skills gaps have opened up at the trade level. Electricians, plumbers, mechanics and secretaries were once recruited straight from vocational secondary schools, but now these institutions send 62 per cent of their students to higher education instead. The problem is so severe that South Korea’s minister of education has declared a nationwide “crisis of over-education.”

Some UK academics fear a similar pattern could develop here. By focusing on our position in the league tables, which measure only numbers of qualifications, we could end up increasing supply far beyond what the market can absorb.

Professor David Ashton, founder of the Centre for Labour Market Studies at the University of Leicester and an expert in national systems of education and training, is worried. “I find this idea of Leitch’s that almost half the workforce needs to have HE qualifications to make us a competitive economy highly questionable. To me his targets seem way off the mark because, from all my studies, demand for it isn’t there.”

The Institute of Education’s Professor Andy Green, who specialises in skills

## League table obsession

Britons are a bit obsessive about league tables, which is odd given that we hardly shine in most of them. As well as Leitch’s gloomy skills comparisons, our relegation to the bottom of the class by Unicef for our children’s well-being made headlines recently, not to mention the revelation that our schools are ranked 22 out of 30 OECD countries.

Perhaps the fascination comes from the internal culture of constant rankings and comparisons – every year anxious parents pore over the DfES school league tables, while prospective students devour the university rankings churned out by the broadsheets. But is this culture impeding our attempts to “upskill”?

### Driving up standards or shortages?

Advocates claim that league tables facilitate market choice, driving up standards across the board. But many blame them, at least in part, for our serious shortage of graduates in science, engineering and in languages.

As Conservative shadow higher education minister Boris Johnson points out in the round table discussion that starts on page 19, some schools (particularly grammar and independent schools that are determined to rank well) dissuade students from taking these subjects at A-level. This is simply because they are more difficult to get top grades in, and thus would drive down the school’s ranking.

Similarly, universities are reluctant to be innovative in creating vocational courses and “bite-size” modules that don’t convert into full degrees, because they aren’t taken into account by university league tables. For some, these tables are becoming real impediments to change, forcing institutions to focus on values that don’t correspond to students’ or the economy’s needs.

According to the Institute of Education’s Professor Andy Green, the UK focuses on league tables far more than the rest of Europe. Partly this is because many European countries don’t have a system of school choice, rendering them irrelevant at that level. But if Leitch is right and we really are in a skills race against the rest of the world, are we starting out with our shoelaces tied together?

# Passionate about skills that serve business

A lack of basic skills is what led employers to reject Tomlinson's recommendations, says Sir Digby Jones  
*By Anushka Asthana*

The employer is the customer of a product called a young person coming out of the education system. The education system is failing the nation by not producing employable people

"There should not be a vicar or rabbi, a mullah or priest, there should not be a politician, employer, trade unionist or teacher that does not think this is the most important aspect of Britain in the 21st century."

Providing people with the basic skills that are needed to make them employable is something that Sir Digby Jones is passionate about. The man who has been appointed as the government's skills envoy thinks that the nation is facing a crisis.

"There are seven million adults who cannot read and 11 million who cannot add up," he says. "After 11 years of full-time, compulsory, free education half the kids who take a GCSE do not get a grade C or above in English and maths."

## Rejection of Tomlinson

It is that lack of basic skills, argues Jones, that led the business community to reject recommendations from Sir Mike Tomlinson when he published a major report on the 14–19 curriculum more than two years ago.

Tomlinson, the former chief inspector of schools, called for the biggest shake-up of secondary and further education in England for decades. GCSEs and A-levels should be binned, he advised, and replaced by a diploma system that combined vocational and academic subjects.

The radical proposals were meant to offer a solution to an age-old problem; how do you elevate the status of vocational education? Despite massive support from headteachers, teachers and college leaders, ministers rejected the plans.

## Employer hostility

Sitting in his office in the City of London's square mile, Jones, former director-general of the CBI, explains why employers were hostile to the proposition: "They were saying 'we know the currency of GCSE, we understand the currency of an A-level'," argues Jones.

"Until you produce the product of your education system at 16 that can read, write and count, don't complicate the issue. If you want to bring in a diploma that goes across the board in five, ten years time, when you have sorted this out, do."

Such a fundamental change would otherwise fail to address the "real, inherent problem" in British education, according to Jones: "that half its product is unemployable."

He has no doubts about his rejection of Tomlinson's diploma: "The moment the

educationalists said I was wrong I knew I was right," he says.

Instead, Jones is championing the half-way house that ministers have opted for. A-levels will stay but alongside them will come specialised diplomas – more vocational alternatives that can either act as a precursor for university or immediate employment.

## Equivalency

The first five diplomas, which will include engineering, construction and creative and media, will start in 2008. In the meantime, ministers and civil servants are busy trying to persuade top universities, such as the Russell group, and employers that the new qualifications will be equivalent – and not inferior – to A-levels.

It is a tough ask. In March even Alan Johnson, the education secretary tasked with boosting the new diplomas, admitted they could "go horribly wrong".

"I can see class stigma arising in middle-class Britain," acknowledges Jones. "There is a lot of 'other people can do this diploma, not my son', but that is a societal change that is essential. I do see quite an appetite for this."

To try to avoid potential pitfalls, he says the first step is to improve the engagement between employers and local schools and further education colleges in the way that already happens in universities.

## Diplomas over degrees

Local employers need to approach pupils and tell them that "I am more interested in getting you with a diploma than waiting till you are 21 with a degree," says Jones.

Strengthening the employer voice was an approach that was championed by Sandy Leitch when he published his review into the long-term skill requirements of the UK late last year. He said that the nation should aim to be a world leader in skills by 2020. The change was urgent, argued Leitch, to help the UK to compete against emerging powers such as China and India that were generating graduates at an enormous rate.

For Jones, the answer is to focus on the opportunities for those aged 14 to 19. "Sixteen has become the Clapham Junction of education. Everything has to change then," he says. "What is so magical about 16? There are loads of 14-year-olds who should not be anywhere near school but they should be in a structured learning environment and they should be getting huge practical experience linked into a form of training."



**Sixteen has become the Clapham Junction of education. Everything has to change then**

While the diplomas offer one answer to the nation's skill shortages, another answer, according to Jones, is the Train to Gain initiative.

Train to Gain encourages employers to highlight skill gaps, link up to further education colleges and release staff for a few hours a week to be trained with funding from the government. Jones hopes businesses will sign up voluntarily.

"What Leitch said was, if we don't see a substantial increase in the number of employers who are training at that level by

2010, then government should legislate for compulsory training," he says. "Now that would be awful. You would have one size fits all and you would have the great clunking fist of inspections and form filling and bureaucracy."

### **Public sector lead**

Jones argues that public sector employers must lead the way and criticises hospitals and local authorities for failing to do so. "People say, 'isn't it the government's job to teach them to read, write and count, because they were in charge of schools?' The answer is 'yes it is' but we don't live in a perfect world so let's get on with it," he says.

For the next generation, however, Jones wants to see improvements earlier on: "The employer is the customer of a product called a young person coming out of the education system. The education system is failing the nation by not producing employable people."

### **Soft skills**

As such, he is critical of threats by the National Union of Teachers to strike over pay. The profession has a duty, he contends, to teach "soft skills" such as communication, a sense of hard work, punctuality and confidence.

Failure to improve skills will be a disaster, says Jones: "The social cost of this is enormous." Unskilled workers "tend to have no self-respect, no aspiration, they become unhealthy, they do the white

powder, the kids come home to a house with no books – it is a dreadful situation for a society to have.

"We are the fifth biggest economy on earth. We are the one nation that has made a success of globalisation and this is our nasty, little, dirty secret: that we have got this phalanx of society which is completely ill equipped to deal with the skill base needed."

*Anushka Asthana is education correspondent at the Observer*

# Truly unified funding slips further away

Leitch's report advocates using public money to provide courses for employers. In reality, it's certificates for skills workers already have  
*By Alison Wolf*



STOCKPERY/BELLES/STOCK

Universities teach an ever-wider range of subjects to a student population of well over two million, while further education (FE) colleges offer higher education (HE) courses to another 120,000 and enrol another two million-odd adults in total.

It seems increasingly odd to fund these systems in completely different ways. Indeed, Scotland already has a unified funding council. Yet, in England, the two systems have moved further and further apart. So, when the Leitch report starts talking about “integrated” systems, and recommends the same “demand-led routes” for “all publicly funded, adult vocational skills in England” it sounds like a shift in the log-jam.

No such luck. “All adult vocational skills” turns out to mean nothing of the sort. Apparently law, medicine, surveying, physiotherapy and the like do not involve skills, since they are certainly not part of the Leitch picture. This is just as well because the proposals to integrate funding involve bringing the worst of current FE practice into courses funded by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) monies.

## Demand-led mechanism

The Leitch Review “recommends that a portion of higher education funding for vocational courses, currently administered through HEFCE in England, be delivered through a similar demand-led mechanism as Train to Gain... This will change the incentives of HE providers to respond effectively to employer and individual demand.” But if I offer a degree and it doesn't recruit, this will be because individuals choose not to apply. HE is pretty responsive to individual demand already. Leitch's concern is rather with employers, who “need a strong voice and must be able to scrutinise and shape

strategy and delivery”. Hence “incentives to develop this employer role” should exist through the HEFCE funding stream as well as the Learning and Skills Council.

## Courses for employers

HE and FE are happy to supply courses for employers if the employers are willing to pay. So the big recommendation is, in fact, to provide courses for employers, paid for with public funds. However, the “Train to Gain” model promises employers far more than it delivers. In practice, it often involves signing up employers whose employees can be certificated for skills they already possess, to help meet national targets for numbers of qualifications. As for the paperwork, one major “provider” recently told the House of Commons that there are “17 forms to fill in when we take on a learner... before we have even started.”

Worse, the funding is “outcome related”, so as much as half depends on the candidate passing. The higher education press in England has been occupied, of late, with a couple of high-profile cases where academics felt pressured to pass students, or had their decision to fail them overruled. Under “output-related funding” this sort of thing is, inevitably, routine stuff (and yes, there are research studies that prove it).

Calls for a unified funding system often suggest letting people amass credits anywhere in the system, and adding them up to make qualifications and degrees. Funding would be for credits awarded. The Leitch recommendations suggest one way that could be done; and highlight the dangers of that route into unified funding.

*Alison Wolf is Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management, King's College London*

# Will the bottle rocket motivate a generation of scientists?

How do you make science teaching inspirational?

By Emma Lee-Potter

Lord Leitch didn't pull his punches when he published his report on the UK's long-term skills needs last December. "Without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all," he said. "The case for action is compelling and urgent."

Scientists agree all too readily with his words. They have been warning for years that the shortage of specialist science teachers and decline in pupils taking A-level science is putting Britain's technological future at risk.

## Equipping next generation

When the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee published its *Science Teaching in Schools* report last year, it stressed the importance of effective science teaching – "both for ensuring a satisfactory degree of scientific literacy in society at large, and for equipping the next generation of scientists and engineers." Committee members wittingly described school science departments as understaffed, ill-equipped and uninspired and expressed concern at the number of students shunning science in favour of "easier" A-levels. While the overall number of A-level entries increased by 10 per cent between 1992 and 2006, chemistry entries fell by 6 per cent, maths by 13 per cent and physics by 34 per cent.

Just last month CBI director-general Richard Lambert called for three key improvements to tackle the problem. He said there should be greater investment in school science labs to bring them into the 21st century, more specialist science teachers and more time devoted to science in the curriculum.

But, despite the doom and gloom, a number of inspiring projects are under way to engage pupils' interest in science.

"In my experience there is a lot of good science teaching out there, but I do acknowledge that we have got to find more ways of genuinely engaging students," says Dr Derek Bell, chief executive of the Association for Science Education. "Part of



LAURENCE GOUGH/DREAMSTIME

the problem is that students see all these exciting scientific advances in the news but they still need to be able to understand and learn the core basic concepts."

The Undergraduate Ambassadors Scheme is doing its bit to encourage more science, technology, engineering and maths undergraduates to pursue teaching careers. Launched five years ago by science writer and broadcaster Simon Singh, the scheme gives students from university departments across the UK the chance to work alongside teachers in local schools and experience what teaching is really like.

Other initiatives include an £18m project to persuade young people to study science, technology, engineering and maths, and the Science Community Partnership Supporting Education (Score), launched last year to address the challenges facing science education. Regional Science Learning Centres have also been set up to help teachers keep up to date with contemporary scientific ideas and advances.

## Capturing imagination

The most important work, however, is being done in classrooms up and down the country by science teachers. Take Manchester University academic Dr Sarah Heath, who regularly gives school demonstrations on solids, liquids and gases and uses an internet craze for bottle rockets, making Diet Coke fizz 18 feet into the air, to capture youngsters' interest in science.

"It always takes them by surprise," she says. "Some people say it's trivialising science but I think that anything that hooks them into the subject has got to be good. We need to bring on the next generation of scientists – after all, they will be our scientists of the future."



# Round table: Engaging with a skills agenda

How can higher education engage with the skills that employers need to improve the UK's competitive edge?

**Jenni Russell** Thank you all for coming. The question put to us is: "How can higher education institutions engage with the skills agenda?" As you know, this government has got a completely new emphasis on the importance of skills at all levels and has set a target of getting 40-45 per cent of the adult population to engage with some experience of higher education. At the moment that statistic is at 29 per cent. There is a great deal of anxiety about whether we have an infrastructure that will allow that culture shift. Traditional attitudes to higher education are about academic excellence. Is this going to obstruct the development of any serious attempt to offer people an alternative vocational path that is also a pathway into higher education and higher skills?

I am going to start by asking John Kerr to set out what he thinks the current problems are and how they ought to be solved.

**John Kerr** The task of the Edge Foundation is to promote changing public perceptions of vocational and practical learning. It is very important for us to see progression from vocational courses in schools and colleges to practical courses in higher education (HE). Otherwise, vocational courses will always be seen as second best. There are some worrying signals around the new specialised diplomas. If these will not lead to HE, why are we doing them?

As an example, Edge is trying to set up a brokerage to accredit HE at work. A good proportion of training in the workplace takes place at the HE level. An accreditation of that training would bring benefits to higher-education employers and employees as well. In some ways, it is quite odd that there is demand for a brokerage service. Employers know where the universities are and the universities know where the employers are but employers find the HE world difficult to negotiate.

For example, when I was at Edexcel a few years ago, we found it a lot easier to deal with the Indian Open University than with the Open University at Milton Keynes. There is a lot of support at vice-chancellor and pro vice-chancellor level but, at the various officer levels, there seems to be a lack of willingness to engage. Many people did not see it as part of their jobs. There is a cultural gap, a distrust of the world of work and, perhaps, some of employers' ideas behind that.

**Richard Brown** Sandy Leitch rightly says that this is a national target, a national crisis that we have to address. The expansion of HE has been relatively recent. Only in the past 20 years have we moved from an elite system to a mass HE system, so the majority of the workforce has not had any experience of HE. The question is how do we engage them?

The market has been estimated at something like £5bn, of which HE institutions have £300m at the most. That is a very small percentage but, equally, an enormous opportunity. HE institutions are excellent at delivering two-, three- or four-year awards but they are less good at delivering bite-sized bits of learning, which is what small companies need. Sandy Leitch misunderstands the nature of the challenge that we are facing. He continues to talk about qualifications rather than thinking about these bite-sized bits of learning, such as how you develop a business plan. Most family-owned businesses cannot grow because they cannot go to a bank with a business plan and ask for backing. How can HE help them? How many credits is that worth, Rob, against the 120 credits that you are used to delivering and what your funding and quality systems, staff and products are geared to?

We just do not know what businesses are spending reliably with HE institutions and what the market or latent demand could be. We do not know what co-financing deals really look like. A few key institutions

**There are some worrying signals around the new specialised diplomas. If these will not lead to HE, why are we doing them?**  
**John Kerr**

are able to do it but we do not know if that is replicable across the sector.

We have to look at what works and why. We then need a new funding system, by credit as opposed to funding by qualification. We need a new quality system; is there a role for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in its current form in assessing work-based learning and who should be assessing that? There needs to be an agreement as to the role of the employer and the role of the academic in quality. Some vice-chancellors think this is such a new business that they almost need to develop a new institution on the side. If I was a vice-chancellor, I doubt that I would be entering this market seriously at the moment.

**Rob Cuthbert** I think we are in that market. Funding by credit is the thing to do. As to bite-sized learning, we have a modular scheme that allows things down to five credits now. An undergraduate would do 120 credits a year for three years – 360 credits get you an honours degree. Typically, a full-time undergraduate student would do 20- or 30-credit modules, which works out at four to six modules a year. When we first developed five- and ten-credit modules for staff based in the construction industry, it was a bit of a challenge for quality assurance but this was ten years ago.

A lot of university modular schemes are not full credit-earning systems. When you look closely, they are still one- to three-year schemes. Most universities still have, lurking within their modular scheme years, stages and progressions, unlike most of North America where the system is much more credit driven.

In a fully credit-driven system, you need to amass your modules to get to 360 credits for a degree, 120 for

a certificate and 240 for a diploma at the higher level. There are modules, prerequisites and levels and all you have to do is to make sure you have the prerequisites to go into the next module. A lot of systems that call themselves modular have “stages” in them. You have to complete stage 1, which is typically year 1, and you get 120 credits before you can move into stage 2. A fully credit-driven system is the key issue.

Because the universities do not really have a credit-driven system, funding by credit is extraordinarily hard for the Funding Council to introduce. As soon as there is more money in funding by credit than funding by complete year of study, the universities will respond to that.

**Jenni Russell** How does one make sure that the training given is not just specific to a particular employer or task but is of a wider and more general value?

**Rob Cuthbert** That is the more interesting culture clash. We sometimes get employers coming to us, saying, “We need this in-house development and we want to run this programme and we would like you to accredit it.” We say, “Sorry, if you want something with our stamp on it, it will have to meet our qualification tests and go through our processes.”

**David Young** It has to be recognisable as HE rather than simple skills transmission. We shall have 1,000 learners doing this by the end of this year. Leonard Cheshire, which runs homes and day-care centres for disabled people, has a constant requirement for training within the organisation on issues such as handling and moving people, disability rights and so on. It would be entirely inappropriate for these staff to do a further education

## Round table participants



**Richard Brown**  
Chief executive,  
Council for Industry  
and Higher  
Education



**Sally Hunt**  
Joint general  
secretary,  
University and  
College Union



**Prof Rob Cuthbert**  
Deputy vice-  
chancellor,  
University of the  
West of England



**Boris Johnson MP**  
Shadow minister  
higher education



**Mark Emerson**  
Headteacher,  
Stoke Newington  
School



**John Kerr**  
Development  
director,  
Edge, former chief  
executive, Edexcel

**To have evidence other than a credit transcript, such as a certificate of achievement of what they have done, is quite nice**  
**David Young**

(FE) certificate in education, requiring many hours a week. So we got these staff thinking about their practice in learning, looking at theories of learning, identifying examples from their own work and testing this out and they got a 60-credit university certificate at Level 4.

The bite-sized concept is interesting. We go down to two credits, although nobody has ever done a two-credit module. We have a series of certificates of achievement from 30 credits at all levels, then 60 credits, and then you are into intermediate and so on. I hear what you say about people wanting only a 15-credit certificate, but you have to think about the learners. To have evidence other than a credit transcript, such as a certificate of achievement of what they have done, is quite nice. It is no more than one-quarter of one stage of a degree but, equally, it is no less, and it is identified as being at a higher level.

**Kate O'Connor** For the employer, the answer lies with existing organisations. The Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) can speak on behalf of all employers in their industry. It makes more sense for the economy, learners and groups of employers for that analysis to be carried out across the group of employers instead of just one employer, with one specific set of learning requirements.

**Jennifer Latto** SSCs are at different stages of maturity. Some got off the starting blocks faster than others. Some of the work going on in the Centres for Knowledge Exchange in the north-west, particularly in construction, suggests that the way to reach groups of SSCs is through their supply chain. That gives you a group that is more reasonable to deal with than just individuals and small employers.

Also, the Regional Skills Partnerships really ought to be playing a role here. They are a collection of all the people in the region who have a particular remit in the skills area, relating to the preferred sectors that the Regional Economic Strategy Group has identified. So, there is a tighter agenda and most of them have picked six or eight areas of skills that they want to develop in terms of the economy.

**Peter Kingston** Given the difficulties that some universities have in getting undergraduates, I find it surprising that a half-decent businessman or woman cannot knock on their doors and persuade them to run a course, whether it is bite sized or great blow-out sized. Some of the examples given sounded to me as if they have already been done in FE colleges. Why can't people go to FE colleges if they want to learn to implement a business plan? Why does it have to be done in a university?

**Jenni Russell** Where do people draw the line in what should be taught in FE and in HE, Richard?

**Richard Brown** We do not know what a bite-sized bit of learning looks like in HE as opposed to FE. If you are dealing with five and ten credits, what coherence do you need for them to be at the HE level?

In England the situation is slightly more messy because we have some parts of FE delivered through HE and vice versa, and why not? If we want a more seamless system, we may need closer co-operation between HE and FE institutions and we have many examples around this table of universities working with their clusters of FE colleges to achieve just that. Widening participation is all about getting on an



**Peter Kingston**  
Further education editor, *Guardian*



**Kate O'Connor**  
Executive director, policy and development, Skillset



**Prof John Tarrant**  
Special adviser to GuildHE



**Angie Kokes**  
Vice principal, Henley College



**John Offord**  
Research officer for further education, NUS



**Prof Lorna Unwin**  
Professor of vocational education, Institute of Education



**Prof Jennifer Latto**  
Adviser on higher education strategy, Northwest Regional Development Agency



**Jenni Russell (Chair)**  
Broadcaster, presenter and *Guardian* columnist



**Prof David Young**  
Head of flexible learning, School of Flexible and Partnership Learning, University of Derby

escalator of learning and being carried up, keeping on the escalator and driving knowledge forward.

**John Tarrant** We need a more rigorous analysis of what we mean by higher level skills. It is certainly not the practical skills of widget-making, chemistry or business studies; it is much broader than that. It is about maturity, self-confidence, seeing things in context, getting a much wider scale perspective. That is what has made successes of those individuals who have come through widening access programmes into HE. Can that be delivered in bite-sized chunks and can it be delivered anywhere other than in a higher education environment?

We always talk about employers as if they were a single entity. But we are talking about one-person bands. We are talking about self-employment. We are talking about portfolio lifestyles. I estimate that something like 60 per cent of the graduates from a university like Huddersfield will be self-employed at some time in their careers, if not immediately – the nurses, the accountants, the architects, the musicians. That is the employer landscape into which most HE students are going and yet we hardly ever talk about the diversity within that landscape.

There is a disjuncture between the higher level skills we think of as being highly desirable and translating that into small programmes in writing business plans. I do not think they are the same thing at all. Take an undergraduate student doing their placement year in the far east of the Czech Republic, a really tough environment – a fantastic experience. That student comes back, completes his studies, goes to work for a local chemical engineering company and

ends up going back to the Czech Republic to set up a branch plant to employ workers, buys the plant, and is now director of a company.

What made that person successful? It was the broadening of his horizons and so on. I do not know how you measure that.

**Richard Brown** The development of a business plan involves a considerable amount of reflection and acquisition of knowledge. If you imagine that a small company is going to release four or five people, or an individual who might be 20–25 per cent of their workforce for weeks at a time, then we are in the wrong world and the wrong mental map.

**Lorna Unwin** To build on John's points about employers. It is important that we differentiate more across the employer base. Trying to get employers to articulate what they want is a real problem for both FE and HE. Much more needs to be done by the education sector at FE and HE levels.

There is a problem about the homogeneous treatment of employers. Leitch treats the country as if everything is the same and tries to impose a national blueprint. Another part of this discussion needs to acknowledge the huge economic differences between regions in the UK. More local attention is needed – some kind of local system of panels where HE and the SSCs come together with employers to look at issues at a local level and have more meaningful dialogues.

Employers want very different things from HE. Large numbers of big employers, successful employers, want traditional HE because that is who they recruit from and they use the academic measures for their recruitment. They may talk the talk of transferable skills but actually what they want is people with firsts in traditional degree subjects. It is a proxy for intelligence and social capital so that you can fit into the graduate training schemes and, actually, that fit is often right.

**Jenni Russell** That seems to fit with what John is saying, which is that lots of things that currently are not measured are actually what employers want and what people gain from a more traditional experience of HE. A collection of bite-size credits may not fit that model, that socialising experience.

**Lorna Unwin** Yes, we need to make sure we are not disadvantaging people who have not gone down the traditional academic route straight from school into university but, if we want them to have a university experience, we need to think what that means.

**Jenni Russell** All the research on the cohort groups born in 1958 and 1970 shows that soft social skills became of increasing importance to people's success in later life. We have a socialising problem with people, particularly the kinds who, at the moment, are being targeted as needing to get their skills raised. The social capital stuff that we find hard to measure is what they are not getting. Boris?

**More local attention is needed – some kind of local system of panels where higher education and the Sector Skills Councils come together**  
**Lorna Unwin**



**The more we go on about parity of esteem, the more we use that vocabulary, paradoxically, the more we will entrench that conceptual division**  
**Boris Johnson**



**Boris Johnson** I have difficulty with the word “skills”. Twenty per cent of education in FE colleges is actually basic reading, writing, and mathematics. The real problem is the 4.4 per cent who leave primary school unable to read, write or do mathematics. That is where the emphasis should be, then a lot of the other problems will start to solve themselves. We would not be in the position we are now in of having to contemplate forcing people to stay on to remedy the failings of education earlier on.

I simply do not know what “the skills agenda” is. I think it is vital for people to have skills but I think we need to be absolutely clear what skills we are talking about and at what level they are acquiring them.

It is the duty of all politicians to extol parity of esteem and to wish that everybody felt just as good about their vocational qualifications as people do about academic qualifications. I can think of loads of things going on in HE that are obviously vocational, it is not solely academic, it is also vocational.

I do not think it is a good thing that there should be this huge chasm between FE and HE. I think it is a mistake. But I think the more we go on about parity of esteem, the more we use that vocabulary, paradoxically, the more we will entrench that conceptual division.

It would have been possible for the Tories to vote against what was Clause 16 of the FE Bill, to say, “We do not want to depreciate the great British degree.” It would have been a mistake because it would not have got anywhere. We want FE and HE to be linked, for FE to serve as a kind of ramp up into HE, if you want to look at it that way. I hope, that it will be impossible to have an FE college initiate a foundation degree without some role, some approval from an HE institution

(HEI). That will mean, I hope, that FE colleges and HEIs will not needlessly compete but will interlock. It will help people move on from getting the skills they can acquire at FE colleges to getting an honours degree and all the valuable social skills that were described.

Parity of esteem is basically hokum because the human race does not think like that.

**Sally Hunt** What I have been bothered about in this discussion is the concept that we are not able to celebrate academic excellence and participation in learning for its own sake. We are starting to ignore the fact that academic freedom is actually fundamental to our democratic process.

We do not have a real debate until we recognise that there are all sorts of pressures on what HE is meant to deliver, not least the skills agenda, the widening participation agenda and the development of lifelong learning. Unless we debate what lifelong learning means and what value we place on that as a society, this is not real and universities are never going to succeed in that.

The Open University has been delivering life-changing bite-sized pieces of education for decades, some of which is vocational. What we are talking about is whether a university has a primary role to educate for industry or whether it has a primary role to educate.

**Kate O'Connor** There is a lot of emphasis in Leitch on looking at the skill needs of the 70 per cent of people who are in work now and who are going to be in work in 2020, who will be employers or freelancers in that new world economy. His whole report is based on that premise. It is not talking necessarily about the 18–30 cohort and I think we are kind of straddling several discussions here. We started with the discussion on a new agenda for HE, which is working towards higher level skills for industry and then we started talking about the ways that might be done.

It is absolutely vital that we have employers sitting down with the local FE and HE institutions and working with them on delivery. It is crucial that we have a sector-based analysis of what higher level skills mean to the different parts of the economy. We tend to get caught in a debate about regional/local versus sector/national, vocational versus academic and education versus skills. Can there not be two things?

**Sally Hunt** I did not say “education versus skills”. Look at it the other way round. What can industry do to support HE? If industry is saying, “We want to be competitive” then that is where the debate has to be. Look at the lack of long-term support for employees going into a full degrees or a masters or other skills. Lots of things could be done, but it seems to start from what an HEI can do to support industry.

I would like to hear about tax breaks for companies supporting their employees going into HE. I would like a debate about employee ranking order. Those at the top of the tree will always get to go to Henley, for example, but what training support happens for those lower down the tree if we are looking to have full support for training for individuals and universities.

**Rob Cuthbert** An HE experience, where you leave school at 18, go to a institution where you live in residence among people of a similar social and educational standing and all finish at the same time, has been a minority experience in education for 15–20 years. The skills escalator is a great metaphor: you get on at the bottom and you get off at the top because there is nowhere else to get off, but people can get on and off HE at all sorts of points. If you reduce the debate to, “It is not the experience that I or my parents had”, you are never going to build a different metaphor. Part of that is understanding how credit works in a different way, what a transcript is. There are all sorts of credentials you can award, but they are not generally valued because they are not proper honours degrees, gained by 18-year-olds who left school at that time.

**Jenni Russell** One of the questions we wanted to raise today lies at the heart of this. The government is talking about improving the way that children who are not attracted to the academic route are being taught at school and is bringing in 14–19 diplomas. However, not only is the education secretary expressing his doubt about whether these can be delivered, he is questioning whether they are going to have any credibility.

**John Offord** At a meeting with headteachers in Hull, Jeff Stanton, who is professor of Lifelong Learning at Greenwich University, asked them: “How many of you as practitioners were actually involved in developing the first five diplomas?” None of them put their hands up. He had been told that practitioners have been deeply involved in developing those qualifications. The people designing them do not

really know how to design a curriculum, an assessment system or, indeed, the credit accumulation framework. All of this is desperately askew. There is a social capital issue here because the curriculum is the optic, the spectacles, through which you view those opportunities and put them all together as a life plan. Bring back Tomlinson is the short answer.

**Jenni Russell** Yes. Tony Blair is reported to regret that he turned it down. Mark, presumably you have some experience of what they are planning?

**Mark Emerson** Yes. We need a credit framework and a funding framework that is related to a credit framework and this needs to happen all the way through the system so that children as young as primary school children can see a route for themselves all the way through to university and higher level education.

The range of qualifications and experiences available to young people is mind-boggling. I was quite upset to hear people say that you need social capital and that you get that by meeting like-minded people. Some children who are intellectually able are not able to do that, so how are we going to recognise them? Other children who have lots of life experiences, who have been provided with lots of skills, are not recognised because they are not following an academic route. The first thing we need to do, if we are going to have vocational pathways, is to plot all the way down into primary school.

The qualifications framework from universities is passed down. Every secretary of state for education is afraid to touch it because it would probably be political suicide. What we do is we go around the edges and we put in some diplomas, with a national vocational qualification (NVQ) here and a BTEC there, trying to work round the systemic problem, which is that there is no overarching strategy for education from age three for lifelong learning. I would like the debate not to be about academic/vocational but vocational/non-vocational, because there are plenty of degrees that are vocational. Engineering degrees, medical degrees and accountancy degrees are all well-respected vocational degrees. There is no sense in which things are vocational and non-vocational, but there is definitely a sense in which people are pushed to study for certain qualifications, to gain access to certain universities and then to certain employers who will pick them if they get a first. These are simply proxy indicators.

Plenty of people who get firsts from Oxford or Cambridge probably could not hold down a practical job and be successful in the world of work. Lots of other things have to happen in the workplace to develop the required skills. As a result, there are graduate-training programmes. Why do you need graduate-training programmes if young people come out of HE with the skills they need? It is because we are using proxy indicators to indicate what a young person is able to do.

My son has just picked his options for GCSE. He is very able; if he took ten GCSEs he would probably get ten As or A\*s but he is doing a BTEC, a GNVQ, the core GCSEs and two other GCSEs. Even though he is

**I would like to hear about tax breaks for companies supporting their employees going into HE**  
**Sally Hunt**



**Why do you need graduate-training programmes if young people come out of HE with the skills they need?**  
**Mark Emerson**



extremely able, would he be able to go on to do “academic” A/S-levels? Will he be selected by Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Bristol or one of the prestigious universities? He should be, but will he be? There is not a pathway that recognises those qualifications as having equal value with GCSEs and that is a huge problem.

I used to be a BTEC teacher myself so I know that skills are developed, such as co-operation skills and team-working skills that you do not get at GCSE or at A/S-levels but you do get in the other types of qualifications. My concern is not that he is doing a valid course but whether those courses will be recognised.

I have no problem with HE degrees being done in bite-sized pieces, so long as there is a core of the skills, reflection, evaluation and critical analysis that every person does to achieve a degree. The debate we have been having has been very micro. Problems about types of qualification, the credit system, the way that businesses operate with universities can be sorted if we get the framework and the strategy right but that is the biggest single problem in this country.

**Jenni Russell** So you are not convinced by diplomas?

**Mark Emerson** I am not *un*convinced by them. However, the solution is not another qualification. It is about systemic change that needs to be driven by a framework that is a strategy for educating young people to the level we want them to be educated. That involves degrees and an academic pathway, but also bite-sized credits that you build into something more substantial.

**Rob Cuthbert** I do not disagree with that but it is a huge proposition. Politically, one understands that it could be difficult to go there by one step from here.

One small step would be for politicians and journalists not to reinforce the disparity of esteem because what happens is that everything is forever compared with some educational experience that is believed to have existed 30 years ago and that can only be achieved in residence in a university.

**Boris Johnson** It is not just journalists and politicians who are guilty. It is men, women and families who are guilty of this stereotyping to which you rightly allude.

**Angie Kokes** As much as I agree with Mark, I think access to HE is crucial. I am from Henley College in Coventry, an FE college that serves a hugely deprived area. As an FE college, we work very closely with HE. We negotiate progression routes. We avoid talking vocational and academic as much as possible. It goes back to the local theme that you were talking about before. I think that is crucial. If you are waiting for a national structure, you will be waiting forever.

**Mark Emerson** Why? We had Tomlinson and it was thrown out. The structure will change things over time.

What you have is a leaving certificate, made up of, say, four GCSEs in traditional subjects plus a BTEC, and you have to achieve a certain amount of credits to achieve a leaving certificate. Perhaps if there is an employer link, it will be joint funded, which will fund the credits and the credit system. I am not sure how the HE system works, but I do know how the FE system works. If people are paid to go at the end of the year, you are not encouraging this breadth of qualification that could have core elements of things we all think are important for a Level 4 qualification. If we have vocational areas in schools, such as learning lines for construction and media, and things like that, why cannot those learning lines follow through and the generic skills associated with those learning lines be developed in a spiral curriculum all the way through to Level 4? Then, if an employer wants a specific skill, it is additional to the core elements you do to turn that into a degree.

That is not conceptually difficult. It fits into a framework. If it were funded in that way it would start encouraging change without actually slapping change on everybody – which everyone says “no” to.

I would like to see, for example, the Russell Group universities being able to offer the traditional degree courses with some vocational units alongside them.

**Boris Johnson** It is up to the university to decide what kind of qualifications it wants its prospective students to have. If it is obvious that people are developing their intellectual attainments very well within a BTEC, then I imagine that they will start to recognise it.

**John Offord** But they don’t do that.

**Jenni Russell** Under Tomlinson the point was that, if you wanted to be an engineer, you studied modules that contained key bits of mathematics. Everything was part of a building block and you could either stop and get a job or you could use it to move into FE or HE

because everyone recognised which skills you were acquiring within each module.

**Boris Johnson** I am totally in favour of that. I just do not see how you can compel universities.

**Mark Emerson** You do not compel anyone. What you do is to create a framework within which they operate.

**Jennifer Latto** The basis of Leitch was to address the problem of the lack of competitiveness of Britain and our poorer gross value-added performance. I have seen no suggestion that says we might usefully research some overseas models that are clearly providing a better level of competitiveness, particularly in Europe. Some of the fundamental points are that the UK spends less on external continuing professional development than the rest of Europe and most of that is absorbed by the business schools. I like things like the Swedish model for a skills health check for adults; it seems to open up the agenda.

**Angie Kokes** I do not see Leitch as a threat to HE. Working on the diplomas, as I have in the West Midlands, we have worked together with schools and HEIs, so there was collaboration.

**Boris Johnson** We have a bill going through parliament which relies heavily on creating these local partnerships. You have painted a picture that the Labour government is hoping to supply, which means that every firm will have a skills broker. Do you believe that that is the way to go?

**Lorna Unwin** Not at all. The proposal is around Level 2 qualifications and skills brokers who go out and persuade small employers, and it is not working.

**Angie Kokes** As an FE college we are supposed to be reliant on these brokers to ring us and give us some leads from employers they are working with, but not one single lead has come into our college.

**Lorna Unwin** It is target driven. Leitch is full of Department for Education and Science (DfES) targets, not business needs. Level 2 qualifications – if they are NVQs – are mostly competence-based qualifications that can be acquired by being accredited for what you already know. Evaluation of Train to Gain and the Employer Training Pilot shows many examples of qualifications being given to people who have been doing a job for 20 or 30 years. That is not skills building. The Leitch Report chose to ignore the substantial evaluation of Train to Gain, which shows 95 per cent of it is dead weight and is not about raising skills levels. We need greater aspiration around what we mean by skills. We have to look at our qualification structure which underpins, certainly on the vocational side, what colleges have to use because that is how they are funded. Leitch is saying employers should also be using it.

**Richard Brown** Earlier we said we do not know enough about employer demand but we think Leitch's emphasis on qualifications is probably misguided, particularly when you are dealing with smaller companies. Maybe a way forward, as suggested earlier, is using existing networks of which smaller companies are already a part, maturing SSCs, regional networks, chambers of commerce, and so on. If we start from the business problem, we have to think who is most likely to be able to respond to that? Various FE colleges are capable of it because they are well networked, various universities are capable and some business schools but there is an enormous private sector that can respond incredibly fast. What is the added value that HE brings and how can HE work in partnership with all of these networks?

**Angie Kokes** You raised something about the private training providers, I do not know how many of you are aware of the national tender that is currently going on for the London School of Economics to bring in more providers to deliver an FE-type curriculum, or that is the disguise. The reality is that it is the bigger boys, like Carter & Carter, that are moving in to the training arena and that worries me.

**Mark Emerson** Going back to my view about a framework, I think the issue is about the quality of those courses and how they fit into an overarching strategy. Crediting people who have been in jobs for 20 years probably reflects a backlog of not recognising on-the-job training over a period of time. As a headteacher in a school for seven years, I am much better at it now than I was seven years ago. That on-

**What is the added value that HE brings and how can HE work in partnership with all of these networks?**  
**Richard Brown**



**There is £33bn per annum of private sector training that is not credited**  
**John Offord**



the-job training is valuable and needs to be credited at some point as well.

Many external providers, private providers, in education training, as well as in training for business, do one-off courses, maybe on a particular skill. If there was an overarching framework and the course was quality assured, you could get a credit for it and build towards something that might be a Level 2 NVQ. There is much more out there than we actually give credit to at the moment in all senses of the word.

**John Offord** Leitch is arguing that should happen. Allegedly, there is £33bn per annum of private sector training that is not credited. Ironically, what the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is developing at the moment looks like a rough version of Tomlinson. On vertical access you have levels of challenge from one to eight and on horizontal access, award, certificate, diploma. Interestingly, it is also going to include GCSEs and A-levels. Now, that would also be a very useful model for HE as well.

During a career at British Airways, say you are doing customer care and you want to become an HR manager, you can fit those two qualifications together through public and private provision. The window through which you see this is the curriculum – it defines what it means to be an educated or employed citizen.

**David Young** We have not said much about learners. From our cottage industry at Derby, we like to think that we start from learners' work practices and build the contextual underpinning as appropriate, rather than provide a body of knowledge that fits where it

touches. It is a much more bespoke approach to lifelong learning through the workforce. It is not just about little parcels of fit, gap and deficit, like that Learn Direct advert that has people with holes in them. It is about getting people to articulate the skills they have. It does not matter that the actual credit is small; it is the process through which credit is achieved.

Mines Rescue is a small company of 130 people who were feeling that they were not talking to each other. They have built a bespoke curriculum. It is only 30 credits but it has made a difference to that institution because it is engaged in how it is going to address this programme that it put together, which is focused on communication within the business.

That is the key, learners and the bespoke nature, not delivery. Skills would be better articulated as learning.

**Sally Hunt** We are still not incentivising people enough at non-traditional levels. We have completely avoided the funding issue and incentives for learners. The grants are not there for learners on different levels.

Also, we still have not looked sufficiently at how we are encouraging lifelong learning in industry. We have to make sure that it is able to fund its employees going back into university or other learning, and we have to incentivise that on a level that is about government engaging in it. We cannot solve it without that.

In industry, employers need incentives to enable their employees to learn in a real way. Schools need incentives that enable them to fund all the topics not central in the curriculum because otherwise they will fall off the agenda. In FE, you have to look at what is not happening in terms of A-level support; it is becoming much more difficult for an FE college to fund alongside the skills agenda.

**Angie Kokes** At my FE college we have stopped doing A-levels because they are funded better in sixth form schools than we are in FE anyway. We chose to go down the BTEC route. There is another college in Coventry that does A-levels, so the choice still remains within the city. I am not saying it would work for others but I know others that have done the same.

**John Offord** We have a massive amount of selection at 18 but an even bigger amount at 16, and this is simply not recognised. Five GCSEs is a high-risk gateway that is also a cliff face. The important element here is choice and this again comes back to Tomlinson and choice within rules of combination. Leitch says that the learner, particularly a vocational one, is the *tabula rasa* that staff in institutions and employers will overwrite because you cannot take a publicly funded qualification that is not SSC approved, except if it is a foundation degree. There are two different voices – the HE voice and the vocational one. How are they going to choose what you want to do and what you might be capable of doing? Your choice should be within rules of combination, which were very clear and very transparent in Tomlinson, but no longer exist.

**Jenni Russell** Is it because you have such a deep emphasis on academic skills that by the time children get to 14, if they are not particularly good within the system, they decide they are failures.

**John Offord** Everybody working on Tomlinson knew this would impact on qualifications for 14-year-olds and it was another thing that frightened the horses.

**Kate O'Connor** All of us in the Sector Skills Council first-tranche move supported the Tomlinson proposals and an overarching strategic framework of qualifications, from school, through to HE and into the workplace.

We were also asked to lead the development of the particular diplomas with practitioners in HE, FE and industry, and we have all done that. The diplomas have enshrined the key principles of Tomlinson's proposals, bar the very important one of having one overarching qualification.

From the SSC's point of view, all of those qualifications have been developed with breadth, with people being able to follow different routes, as well as with HE in mind. Within the timescale and from where we started it has been a fantastic development. What we were doing was developing those qualifications within a framework.

With regard to providing an overarching analysis of education and training, and qualifications that suit the employer, the learner, and practitioners in education and training, Skillset is doing exactly that.

**Jenni Russell** Kate, will HE take that seriously?

**Kate O'Connor** HE institutions we have spoken to want to see what the assessment looks like. That is not something that SSCs are leading on, that is quite rightly the role of awarding bodies. New qualifications take years to make out.

**Boris Johnson** Universities want certain attainments in certain traditional difficult subjects, modern languages, science, and mathematics, whatever. What worries me is that these subjects are increasingly ghettoised in the independent sector, in grammar schools and I want to know what we can do to stop that. We need to stop people worrying about failing and encourage them to do things even if they do fail.

The way forward might be to say, "Well, let's think again about league tables," or it might be to say, "Let's give special weighting to kids or schools who do well in these subjects," and re-emphasise those things.

**Jenni Russell** I would like to ask you what Tory policy would be on that because there is fear of league-table failure from top to bottom. Kids at Winchester are not being allowed to do subjects that they will not get As in.

**Boris Johnson** It is introducing huge distortions into people's choices. My impression is that kids of average ability are being steered away from tough things like modern languages and sciences because everybody is petrified of them getting a bad grade.

**Peter Kingston** Even those children doing modern languages do not get much of a chance because of the quality of the curriculum.

**Jenni Russell** My daughter got an A\* in French at GCSE but she has a vocabulary of about 120 words and she arrived in Paris last year unable to speak a word. I said to her, "What you need is a grammar book." She agreed she didn't know any grammar. After two weeks she rang me up and said, "If I buy a grammar book, I'll be able to speak this language."

**Mark Emerson** In our school, a fairly high achieving school, in the top 4 per cent of the schools in the country for added value, the kids who opt for language courses tend to be middle-class.

There is a huge issue about the curriculum and the way it is intended to be delivered. We do not have conversational approaches to modern languages, so children are switched off. The strategy five or six years ago was that everybody did a language whether they wanted to or not. That put loads of children off languages, so there was a relaxation in that to allow children to opt for languages.

In science we need to enthuse kids, to get them involved, to see science as a really interesting part of the curriculum. That, again, has been pushed out.

A lot more children in our school are achieving a good GCSE grade in maths but the amount going on to A-level is not as many and I do not know why that

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is. We all probably choose subjects that we feel more of an affinity with and think we are going to succeed in. There is an element of wanting to be challenged but not too much.

It all points to the curriculum schools are expected to deliver, particularly in Key Stage 3.

**Rob Cuthbert** I am trying to connect back to regional skills. Languages are quite an interesting case study at HE level as well. Most people who work in education are interested in doing the best they can for the learners they engage with. That is why we get these apparently strange choices of GCSEs, because people are trying to do the best for the learners in their environment. Part of it is “targetitis” and league tables, and a lot of it is micromanagement – people do not know what they are talking about or do not know as much as they think they do about what they are talking about – and some of it is market failure. You see that in HE, particularly, and languages are a good example.

The HE market is not very efficient because nobody really knows what quality is. Prestige gets substituted for it as a proxy. All the time, people go for prestige because it is a safer bet than looking for something that is really good quality, whatever that means, and we will all disagree round the table. Languages are a classic example. People go for the prestige languages course. The only language degree courses that are just about surviving in the UK are the ones that are doing mediaeval literature in French, or whatever it is. All the ones that do area studies and cultural engagement and all of that have gone by the wayside because

students do not want to do them, or only slightly. If you look at the mix of language degrees that have been achieved in the UK, most of them are no longer those sort of skills-related Leitch-encouraged types of programmes, they are literature-based courses.

**Jenni Russell** Why don't people want them?

**Rob Cuthbert** Because people think it is safer to go for prestige rather than really good applied language courses and they are probably right.

**Mark Emerson** And many go on to be accountants and lawyers.

**Rob Cuthbert** If you do engineering in a Russell Group university, which is very vocational, you are almost bound to work in the City.

**Lorna Unwin** I think the irony of most of the latter part of the conversation – in fact a huge irony – is that Leitch was told not to touch schools. That is a really, really important point, that we have had a major report, on skills and competitiveness, where the committee is told from the outset: “You must not say anything about schools.” When the Tomlinson Report was put together, their working group was told that they must not say anything about apprenticeships.

My point is that a lot of this conversation has been in some way or another about wanting a more holistic system, so it would be really nice to have a clutch of reports commissioned, not just one report, which could be brought together to show the jigsaw and what is wrong with it.

**Jennifer Latto** I want to say something about universities, and particularly the old universities in the Russell Group. My feeling is that it is a bit like the old lady who wanted to get to Brighton who asked the porter how to get there, and he said, “Oh, if I was going to Brighton I wouldn't start from here.” Although the Russell Group, like all the other universities, is subject to the requirements of the Office of Fair Access, nevertheless they are under this terrific pressure from students and their parents for traditional three-year degree courses.

The shift to risk is when they try to run foundation degrees, whether themselves or through associate colleges, which may be difficult to recruit for. There may be employer demand but they also need to have student demand in order to meet their targets and trigger their funding.

Someone said to me that the problem is research. Actually, I do not think it is research. In these days of the Higher Education Innovation Fund, which is encouraging researchers to think about the practical and commercial applications of their research, I think those academics are starting to be much more in touch with the needs of regional, national and international business and to understand some of the skills that are required. It is a massive promotional

**It is a massive promotional problem to get away from the stereotype of the three-year degree as the ultimate accolade**  
**Jennifer Latto**



problem to get away from the stereotype of the three-year degree as the ultimate accolade and the key to social and financial success, and to draw the whole of the sector along with you.

There is a major job here if we want to turn this round, simply in terms of marketing.

**Jenni Russell** Boris, do you have an idea about how the Conservatives would plan to introduce a more highly educated population for those who are not traditionally academic?

**Boris Johnson** The first and most important thing is that all of this discussion, what we do in FE, HE and the whole skills agenda is a reflection and symptom of the problems we have in education earlier on in the chain. To a very great extent, what we are trying to do in FE, with the schools agenda and all the rest of it, is to remedy the problems that have been set up earlier.

Even in HE, in the first year of university, many students are having to take courses in remedial mathematics and English. It would be easier if this was front-loaded rather than back-loaded. It would be easier, better, more equitable and socially just for society if people left primary school much closer to the same kind of basic attainments.

Charles Clarke was right five years ago when he said that that is the place that the secretary of state for education should really be directing his energies. I think that is true.

However, there are several things that we can do to widen access. First of all, I think that the university expansion has been a good thing in itself. I hope

everybody is realising that the Tory message on this has changed [*laughter*], and the 2004 Act has not been a deterrent in lots of ways that people feared, Sally, even my party, and we are all guilty of this – though not me necessarily [*laughter*].

The figures are good this year. They are 7.2 per cent up in England and 6.4 per cent up throughout the country and 7.6 per cent from the lower economic groups in England, which is...

**Sally Hunt** Flat-lining.

**John Offord** And they are vocational students.

**Boris Johnson** There are two things we can do to help. One is the route that you are all describing, that we are groping towards, which is this agenda that Mark describes, this idea of making universities more willing to look at candidates with vocational qualifications.

**John Tarrant** Some universities. Many universities have been doing it for generations, and one day we will turn the elite completely on its head and say that the elite institutions are those institutions that widen access, those that provide bite-size courses and those that are working with employers.

**Boris Johnson** One day. I am sure that that process is a good thing but it will take time.

The second thing we should do to widen access to the whole area that I was just talking about, is to look at the difficulty of persuading kids from the lower socio-economic groups in schools that do not have a record of sending a large percentage of kids to university, to do the subjects that universities want. You could have some policy things to do that. You could do things to change the league tables structure and incentivise the study of modern languages, science and mathematics. You could do things in that area and David Cameron has certainly been talking about that.

The third thing you should do to widen access, and everybody has been saying it, is to stop thinking of university as being an 18–24 production. That is completely wrong. The huge expansion is going to come, particularly with the demographics, with people of all ages.

I very much like what you said about getting away from the idea of an escalator, but I cannot think of a better metaphor than that.

**Lorna Unwin** A climbing frame.

**Boris Johnson** That is right. We need a climbing frame. We need a scaffolding. We need a system of scaffolding with ladders that you can ascend or descend at any moment. I am describing a ziggurat with several levels where you can get up, stop and perhaps a little later on you can get to the top.

**Jenni Russell** Thank you all very much.