

## Second commissioners' meeting: visit to Bridgwater College 26 September 2012

### Introduction

1. This report summarises the discussions and learning from the second commissioners' meeting which included a visit to Bridgwater College in Somerset. The Commission's overall aim is to raise the quality, and improve the outcomes and impact, of adult vocational teaching and learning for learners and employers.
2. Commissioners are committed to taking account of the views of learners, teachers, trainers and employers at all stages of their work. Each of their five planned meetings includes a visit to see different examples of excellent adult vocational teaching and learning in action and to hear from learners, their tutors and employers about what makes for excellent teaching and learning. At Bridgwater, commissioners were involved in one of three visits to:
  - a. Bridgwater College centre, visiting a range of different vocational areas, and meeting with a group of advanced practitioners;
  - b. Energy Skills Centre, to hear about the partnership with EDF Energy;
  - c. Cannington Centre, visiting the college's agricultural and horticultural provision.
3. The Commission's approach is to work from practice to theory. Every commissioners' meeting includes a reflective discussion to learn from the visit and to begin to identify the features and characteristics of excellent vocational teaching and learning and what might be transferable. Through this process of reflection and discussion, one of the Commission's goals is to begin to develop a new language for describing and valuing vocational learning in its own terms.
4. An outline of the learning from each visit and a summary of commissioners' reflective discussions is published on the Commission website following each meeting. These summaries will be a contribution to the evidence base, and also way of sharing the Commission's emerging thinking with a wider audience. Comments are welcomed.

### Presentation and visit

5. Andy Berry, Vice Principal of Bridgwater College welcomed commissioners and gave an introduction to the College's work. Bridgwater is a tertiary college with 3,700 16-18 students, part of a total student population of 14,000. An A-level programme comprising 41 subjects

is followed by 670 students and the College also offers the International Baccalaureate. The College offers a wide range of vocational and industry-related programmes, and currently supports 900 apprentices. Full and part-time higher education provision is also offered, in partnership with a range of universities, including Bournemouth, Plymouth and Oxford Brookes locally and University Central Lancashire for foundation degrees in nuclear decommissioning and engineering.

6. The College works with 800 14-16 year olds from link activities such as tasters, to full diploma programmes. 2,500 employers are involved with the College, including Ford for whom the College delivers an accident repair programme country-wide with the Motor Industry Skills Consortium, and Rolls-Royce, whose apprentices travel from Bristol. With engaged students, staff *'who love their jobs'*, a focus on teaching and learning, and good facilities to support vocational training, the college believes *'success rates look after themselves'*. The College is considered outstanding by Ofsted.

### **Partnership with EDF Energy**

7. One of the commissioner group visits was to the Energy Skills Centre at Bridgwater College, which provided an opportunity to hear from EDF Energy about their partnership with the College. EDF Energy outlined their plans for a new build nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, 15 minutes from Bridgwater. It is envisaged as an 8-10 year build project, then moving into an operational phase. Over the course of the construction phase, EDF Energy estimate a peak workforce of 5,600, taking account of churn this could equate to 25,000 people over the life of the build. Evidence shows that churn increases the greater employees' travel to work time and are, therefore, keen to recruit locally (meaning 90 minutes travel to work). They are also developing two temporary accommodation blocks in Bridgwater, together with an accommodation office to place employees in local rooms to rent.
8. The project is being planned against a backdrop of national skills shortages in some occupations and a need to up-skill locally and nationally. There will also be opportunities to re-skill people into different disciplines over the life of the project. At the end of the build period, there will be opportunities for skilled employees to move into operational jobs or, it is hoped, to other new builds in the UK.
9. The College has been involved in the project from day one. In fact, it had previously worked with Magnox, the company responsible for de-commissioning one of the power stations at Hinkley Point, and had, therefore, already developed expertise in working with the nuclear industry. Magnox is owned by Energy Solutions. As a US company, Energy Solutions had experience of working with American community colleges and therefore saw UK FE colleges as a logical place to go for support, though had not always had the positive response they experienced at Bridgwater.
10. EDF Energy has entered into a local labour agreement with the District Council, in which the College is a partner. The labour agreement supports the Council's economic development strategy to develop low carbon technologies through a cluster approach to attracting new

companies to the area, with skills and R&D support from further and higher education. A new innovation hub is being established on the outskirts of Bridgwater, just off the motorway, which is helping to encourage higher education interest in the area. The EDF Energy project is currently one of the largest construction projects in Europe. EDF Energy's French roots have helped to shape their approach to working with the community as part of a local economic development plan.

11. One of the lessons learned from the London 2012 construction project is that '*demand led*' training delivered in close proximity to the site is a key element in supporting local people into work. Timing is an issue. Work has yet to start on the new build at Hinkley Point, but training is needed now to equip people with the skills to access the site and therefore the employment opportunities that will be available in future. Adopting a partnership approach is vital, to ensure that the College's training programmes develop the skills that will be required to work on the particular manufacturing processes that EDF Energy decides to use.
12. EDF Energy is taking a long term view to developing an '*Education-skills-employment pathway*'. An '*access to apprenticeship*' programme has been introduced this year in partnership with Bridgwater College. The company is working with schools to challenge young people's aspirations and in particular the low take-up of STEM subjects. Their education programme includes: girls' construction challenges; STEM events; keeping in touch with young people (the company has recorded 20,000 interactions with students in the past 18 months); a targeted approach to working with small groups of young people who it is hoped will influence their peers; a focus on working with secondary and middle schools; and a smaller programme with local primary schools. Successful apprentices and graduates act as important role models for young people, particularly as they help to overcome the perceptions of teachers and school-based careers advisers, identified as a problem by EDF Energy.
13. Bridgwater College sponsors an age 3-16 academy next door to the College which now also has links with EDF Energy. This arrangement is starting to benefit adults in the community as well as their children. With two generations of unemployment since the demise of the local plastics industry, the EDF Energy's development is offering new opportunities – 1500 local people have already registered with the employment brokerage linked to the EDF Energy project.
14. Commissioners were keen to understand why EDF Energy had chosen to work with Bridgwater. A number of factors were clear:
  - a. The College took the commercial initiative at the early stage of the relationship with EDF Energy, which helped to prove themselves to the company;
  - b. The College has taken some investment risks, for example an upfront £3 million loan to support the building of the £8 million Energy Skills Centre (which EDF Energy has subsequently agreed to cover);
  - c. The leadership of the College enabled EDF Energy to trust in the partnership;
  - d. The College had prior engagement with and knowledge of the nuclear industry, having worked on the decommissioning of one of the Hinkley sites. As a result, the

concept of the Energy Skills Centre at Bridgwater College was already in place before EDF Energy's plans for a new build in the area;

- e. EDF Energy was able to build on the College's trusted reputation within the local community, which has helped with communicating both positive messages (for example about job opportunities for young people), and managing some of the potential difficulties of disruption to a small rural town.

15. The investment in facilities at Bridgwater College is seen as an important part of EDF Energy's legacy plan – providing a future infrastructure for the community. There are, however, recurrent funding challenges for the employer-college partnership. For unemployed people, for example, there is an industry standard health and safety certificate that is a pre-requisite for prospective employees to get *'through the gate'* to the nuclear power site. And yet this is not publicly fundable - an illustration of the challenge of a public funding system that does not support the skills that employers want, or those that are essential to people seeking work.

16. Investment in specialist staff has also been important for the college – in relation to the partnership with EDF Energy specifically, but also more generally. The leadership of the college has been proactive in focusing on developing high quality provision in new disciplines across a range of occupational and vocational areas: *'with the right people we can offer a wide range of high quality provision'*. And success breeds success: for example, the college's construction centre developed in partnership with EDF Energy has been used to provide training for unemployed people in preparation for jobs at the new Morrisons' distribution centre; and Mulberry (Design) Ltd is building a new factory in Bridgwater with the college responsible for handling the associated recruitment to new jobs. The college has doubled its engineering apprenticeship intake this year *'because of the buzz around and the energy skills centre'*.

## Discussion

### Setting the scene

17. Following the commissioners' visits to either: Bridgwater College centre to see a range of different vocational areas, and meet with a group of advanced practitioners; the Energy Skills Centre, to hear about the partnership with EDF Energy; or Cannington Centre, to see the college's agricultural and horticultural provision, discussion at the commissioners' meeting was introduced by Lorna Unwin who helped us to understand and interpret what we had seen in the context of some of the characteristics of vocational education and training.

18. During the visits at Bridgwater, we had been encouraged to reflect on the following:

- If you were an adult vocational learner entering the college, how would it feel as a learning environment?

- If you were an employer entering the college, what would strike you about the atmosphere and physical surroundings?
- Thinking back to the way the BAE apprentices were developing their identities as BAE employees within an environment that stressed the values and imperatives of the workplace, how might we describe/conceptualise the way adults in the college are developing their vocational identities?
- What challenges do vocational teachers in the college face, both in terms of their work with students (and, where relevant employers and others) and their own professional needs?
- To what extent does the college feel like a workplace?
- Reflecting back on the concept of the 'expansive-restrictive continuum, what 'expansive' features of the college environment and/or the programmes it offers would you highlight?

### **Commissioners' reflections**

19. It was clear that Bridgwater College provided examples of how strong colleges (well led and resourced) can:

- a) be responsive to employers' needs and be a 'player' locally and nationally in showing what FE can do;
- b) provide high quality vocational education for full-time and part-time students of all ages and abilities and be a showcase for this both locally and nationally; and
- c) attract high quality vocational teachers from industry and support them to make the transition to teaching whilst also maintaining their dual identity including their industry-based expertise.

20. We heard vocational teachers speak about the following as being important:

- a) the college needs to create environments that are as close as possible to real work conditions – they described the concept of the 'live environment' where health and safety matters just as in the workplace, but also where it is important to have some fun as in the best workplaces;
- b) but these environments aren't just simulated workplaces, they have to create the balance between instilling students with the behaviours of work and also allowing them time to practise their skills (trial and error, taking risks) through a supported process and they have to introduce theoretical knowledge to underpin practice – this can be done during practical lessons and also in classroom settings – the latter means vocational teachers have to be able to manage both the workshop-style environment and the classroom style environment – hence the next point;

- c) the hardest skill for a new teacher coming in from industry is to learn 'classroom management' – the college (like most) uses observations to monitor new teachers' practice so they can learn and develop quickly from feedback provided by experienced colleagues – so this models what the teachers do with their students – the pedagogical expertise involves learning how to make sure all students are engaged, to use formative assessment, to make lessons participative etc;
  - d) apprentices and other students who are also working will bring ideas into the college sessions from their workplaces – e.g. Ford apprentices 'teach' their teachers about new techniques. We wondered if there was the start of a continuum we could develop here, with the complete newcomer/novice learner at one end to the mature, experienced adult at the other end who is brushing up their skills but might know almost as much as the tutor;
  - e) vocational teachers are integrating the students' everyday use of technology into sessions – e.g. hairdressing tutors getting their students to use their smartphones to take pictures as they work on creating a specific hairstyle so students can then look at them at home to observe their own practice. At the same time, technology has to be part of vocational learning because it's such a central part of the modern workplace – for example on the farm where we saw students learning how to scan a pregnant cow;
  - f) we also observed the way in which the tutors were using the language/vocabulary and artefacts of the workplace so each environment (furniture, hair & beauty, motor vehicle) had its own atmosphere/culture (e.g. the hair salon had relaxing music playing). New vocational tutors will have an impact – e.g. Steve in motor vehicle had spent his first few weeks in college re-organising the workshop to make it more 'real'. Vocational tutors will also find ways to expand the occupational/expertise horizons of their students through participation in skills competitions, taking them to trade shows etc.
21. Across the range of vocational areas we witnessed, we recognised that there are both generic principles of good teaching, learning and assessment, and that each vocational area has different characteristics which are reflected in differences in teaching and learning approaches as teachers try to create environments and atmospheres that reflect the workplace as closely as possible.
22. We noted that all colleges can create simulated environments, but that Bridgwater actually has some real workplaces (e.g. the farm, golf course, the beauty clinic and hair salons, the children's centre, and walled gardens) that are run as businesses which give them credibility with local employers. We wondered whether there is scope for more colleges to do this.
23. Teachers' approaches to maintaining their professional knowledge was widespread although varied. One hairdressing tutor we met works every Saturday in a local salon; the furniture tutor has his own workshop. Automotive staff engage in industry skills and technique updates (Ford). Links with employers offer an important source of CPD, and there were

examples at Bridgwater of this operating two ways: with teachers learning about up to date techniques, and employees and employers benefitting from research and innovation support from the college. One proposal is to take problems encountered on the proposed nuclear construction site at Hinkley Point off-site and down-sized to the Construction Skills Centre nearby which has the same geological conditions and with machines and tools replicating those on the main site etc. Problems would be solved by Tier One contractors, EDF Energy engineers and College specialist trainers working together these would then be applied back on site. In another example, information collected from the scan of the pregnant calf was transmitted back to the classroom for analysis<sup>1</sup> and there was a strong sense of the college farm acting as the '*development arm*' of the local farming community. Both examples suggest the college is valued by local employers for its research and development support. We wondered if this could be an area of differentiation between outstanding and good vocational provision?

24. The relationship with employers is crucial in other ways – some tutors are very plugged into the local and regional labour market (for example, the furniture tutor knew there were 200 furniture makers in the area) and are therefore well placed to help students make connections with potential job or business/self-employment opportunities. Vocational tutors, therefore, need to be able to communicate with employers, as well as with their students and other staff, and tutors being able to speak the '*language of work*' also contributed to students' vocational preparation. One very interesting device used by the college was biographies of vocational tutors which enabled students to have a picture of their teachers' expertise and experience, and also to see examples of a range of pathways and careers in different vocational areas.
25. As with our conversations with BAE apprentices in June, we were struck by how little students talked (or knew) about the qualification specifics they were working towards. They cared about the level of their programme, the subject, and the pedigree or brand of the college, but less so about the qualification itself. We heard a similar message from employers: the qualification was not as important as what it enabled learners and employers to do.
26. The opportunities to apply their vocational learning were highly valued by the students we spoke to. As one of the land based students commented – '*I could learn about veterinary somewhere else, but it wouldn't come across as well as hearing it from a VET with his hand up the cow's backside*'. Another female student on a foundation degree programme spoke of her ambition to work in the control room at the nuclear generating plant and how maths and science made more sense in context – '*every year it gets easier and easier*' (and yet so often maths seems to get harder each year). On the other hand, a student on one of the college's hairdressing programmes talked of how anatomy was the most difficult subject, because of '*having to learn the Latin names*'!

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<sup>1</sup> The example of the vocational teaching and learning commissioners saw in the cattle shed highlighted a range of distinctive vocational learning taking place: it was developing practical problem solving skills (coaching, feedback and critical thinking), team work, a complex knowledge base, use of technology, data analysis, employability skills (a 5am milking schedule), and compassion.

27. The college's outreach work with schools was also important in supporting young people to progress into vocational provision post-16. Taster days were a *'wow factor'* for students, many of whom wished they had been available earlier, in year 10. We recognised the opportunities that being a tertiary college offered to develop strong relationships with local 11-16 schools. At the college's horticulture centre, we were also struck by the opportunities for women returners to re-engage in vocational learning, with significant support from the college.

28. The visit also raised questions:

- a) how are the teachers trained – is it all through the in-service model or is there a link with HE? and to what extent do staff form vocational communities for CPD and also general support?
- b) how much time is there within vocational programmes for covering subjects/ideas beyond the scope of the qualification involved or indeed the job-specific skills?;
- c) some full-time students are progressing through a vocational qualification ladder – e.g. from Level 2 through to Foundation Degree – all within the college – what are the pedagogical differences in teaching them from the day-release apprentices? And, how far from the 'line of sight' of a job can you go without losing that sense of ultimate purpose?

### **Emerging themes**

29. At the end of each commissioners' visit, we begin to identify emerging characteristics of excellent vocational provision. From Bridgwater, these included the following:

- Once again, having a *'clear line of sight to work'* was a key factor in the quality of the vocational teaching and learning at Bridgwater. The quality of the relationships between teachers and learners was at the heart of excellent teaching and learning with a high level of attention paid to meeting individual learners' needs.
- Developing strong partnership approaches to working with local employers was seen as a key factor in Bridgwater's success. The partnerships were characterised by high levels of trust, a shared understanding of the curriculum required and teaching and learning methods, and commercial respect built on a commitment to shared investment and risk-taking.
- Technology is critical to world class work, and also to excellent vocational teaching and learning. Having the right, industry-standard technology and teachers who can use it confidently are essential features of high quality vocational teaching and learning
- Helping students to develop strong vocational identities is another key factor, supported by teachers who themselves have clear (dual) professional identities – as both teachers and vocational specialists.
- The ability to organise and deliver vocational teaching and learning across more than one site is also important, suggesting that excellent provision must be adaptable to, and actively exploit, the particularities of the environment.



- The capacity to involve different types of teachers in the delivery of vocational programmes is also important, suggesting that excellent vocational teachers will identify the best person to deliver different components of a programme, for example tutors, mentors, expert practitioners, peers, trainers and lecturers.

For more information, or comment please contact:

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## Participants

2 <sup>nd</sup> Commissioners' meeting		26 September 2012
Present:	Chair	Frank McLoughlin CBE
	Vice chair	Fiona McMillan OBE, Graham Schuhmacher MBE
	Commissioners	Richard Atkins, Rob Hammond, Prof Matthew Harrison, Sue Hill, Gary Hughes, Colonel Carolyn Johnstone, Roshni Joshi, Martina Milburn CBE, Shauni O'Neill, Jacqui Ramus, Mike Smith, Alastair Taylor Tom Wilson, Dereth Wood
Attending:	LSIS	Rob Wye, Jenny Williams, Eleanor Jackson
	IfL	Jean Kelly
	BIS	Lisa Capper
	Academic partner	Prof Lorna Unwin, Chair in Vocational Education and Deputy Director of the LLAKES Research Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London.
	Specialist adviser	Geoff Stanton
	Bridgwater College	Andy Berry, Vice-Principal
Apologies:	Commissioners	Prof Mariane Cavalli