

Speech: Anne Milton: speech to Association of Colleges Conference

Thank you to all of you for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

My professional background before I entered politics was in the NHS: I trained as a nurse and worked in the NHS for 25 years. But I have to say that it is hard to think of a group of professionals delivering a more important public service than the people in this hall today. A profession caring for young people and old people – changing lives.

I would like to start by briefly sharing some of my memories from the WorldSkills competition which I attended a few weeks ago. I have to be honest, I was completely blown away by Team UK. They did fantastically well – competing on the world stage for skills and achieving great things. And I came away thinking that WorldSkills is probably one of our best kept secrets – and in all my time in politics there are few things that have impressed me so much, and on so many different levels.

One story – but I could mention many that I heard while I was there – was about Ashley who nearly didn't become an apprentice. At school, his teachers encouraged him to go to university – apprenticeships were never mentioned as an option. Ashley was fortunate that his dad employed apprentices so he could see the benefits of training on the job. He secured an apprenticeship with Redrow, one of the largest house builders in the country. And Ashley went on. He was named the world's best young bricklayer at WorldSkills Leipzig in 2013. He went on to complete a degree in Construction Project Management at the University of Salford. And he is now senior site manager at Redrow, managing his own team of apprentices – as well as continuing to volunteer, training members of Team UK in bricklaying.

It really matters to me that the young apprentices who did so well to get to Abu Dhabi are able to follow in Ashley's footsteps, and become an inspiration to others.

Ashley's story, and those of others like him, are why this job matters to me on a very personal level. They are why I am here today, why we are all here today. Our commitment to a public service that transforms the lives and life chances of young people and adult learners. Our commitment to the sector, and a desire for it to get the recognition it rightly deserves.

High quality, resilient and confident institutions with a clear mission and values, and outstanding leadership. Colleges embedded in our communities with excellent teachers that change the lives of others through learning, and give the country, business, industry and the public sector the skills that we need.

But our aim is not just about great colleges. It's about how those colleges – your colleges – can respond to the most critical social and economic

challenges that we face as a country today: tackling disadvantage, and making a success of whatever changes and challenges our country needs. I am going to mention Brexit. You know, and I know, how powerful further education can be as an engine of social mobility. That is also at the heart of the DfE's mission: extending opportunity, and unlocking ambition for everyone.

For young people that have struggled at school, and who lacked access to the support and opportunities enjoyed by many of their peers. For those that want to take a high quality and challenging technical route. For those that want to get a degree in their local community. And for those whose path to learning has taken a different route, or who need to retrain to develop their careers.

You know and I know that the work you do meets the needs of all those people. And I know, and you know, that further education is central to the challenge of delivering a prosperous future for this country after Brexit. Ensuring that we have an adaptable workforce with the skills and opportunities to thrive. Supporting the growth of innovative, productive business. And making the most of local strengths in communities right across the UK.

The reform of technical education will be at the centre of our response to those challenges and we will be saying more about that later this month, including as part of the Government's industrial strategy. Irrespective of Brexit, we also face a skills shortage. For the few of you who were there in Abu Dhabi, we are not alone – the world is suffering a skills shortage.

For me, meeting the challenge of both making sure people are, and feel, they can change the direction of their lives – becoming socially mobile – and tackling those skills shortages are at the core of what I want to help you with.

We all need to be focused on meeting those challenges – colleges, government, the wider FE sector, and indeed employers as well. You want to do that within your institutions, within your communities. I want to play my part within government, by acting as your champion. And I will always bang the FE sector drum. But having a shared purpose is not sufficient on its own. We will only succeed in meeting those challenges by working together.

At the Skills Summit later this month we will be focusing on developing our partnership with employers. Today, I'd like to talk a little bit about our partnership with you.

I know that words like "partnership" and "working together" come with historical baggage. There have been times in the past when our partnerships have been tested. I can understand that, given the changes that we have faced in recent years. And I can also see that the drive for freedom and autonomy has, on occasion, put too much distance between you and Government.

Looking to the future, we need to build on what works well at present. But as we face new challenges, the way in which we work together will also need to change.

I am not coming to you with a blueprint for how our partnership should work from now on. Instead, in a spirit of dialogue, I want to talk to you about what I think are the three emerging themes.

The first of those is support: from Government, for the sector.

We are, and will be, asking a lot of you over the next few years. It is only right to make sure that you get the support that you need.

Wherever we can, we want to deliver that support by harnessing the capacity within the sector. Improvement through collaboration, rather than competition alone. That's what we are doing with the National Leaders programme, and through the new Strategic College Improvement Fund.

Where that capacity for support does not already exist within the sector, or needs to be strengthened, we will invest, strategically, in its development.

You want more money – everyone wants more money. And my job is to be your advocate within Government, making the case for why colleges matter. Money is coming in, but I recognise the challenges you face.

Second, I want Government to be playing an active role.

To be clear, I don't think that Government always knows best, or can do this on its own. But just as an active role for Government is central to our approach on the industrial strategy, we need to adopt the same mind set when thinking about how we achieve the world class FE provision that we need. "By the sector, for the sector" is not, on its own, always the best response to many of the biggest challenges we face together.

As set out in the Government's manifesto, we want to introduce a dedicated programme to help industry experts join the profession – building an ever closer link between business and education. Some colleges and employers are doing this already and it is good to hear about where that is working well. Because, when we come to develop the programme, we won't be saying "we know how to get industry professionals into colleges, and this is what you must do". We will be asking: "what can we do to help meet the very different needs of the sectors, employers and local economies that you work within?" And different areas have very different education and business communities – no one solution will work – you need to tell us what you want and what you need.

There are also some issues where Government has a unique set of levers and resources that can help find solutions to shared problems. We can see that in the positive changes coming out of the area review programme, and support for restructuring. It is why Richard Atkins, the FE Commissioner, is working with more colleges to ensure that the right support for improvement is in place. I meet frequently with Richard and indeed many local MPs, to make sure I keep closely in touch with what's going on.

The third building block is looking at the whole system.

We need a better co-ordinated approach, both within Government, and between the Government and the sector. I am looking to the new College Improvement

Board, chaired by the FE Commissioner, to help deliver that in strengthening quality, for example.

We need to ensure that targeted support for quality improvement works in tandem with wider support for FE teachers and leaders. We need to harness the insights from inspection by Ofsted to help identify improvement needs. We need to reform the accountability system to make it work better. And we need to ensure that our ambition is matched by providers who are financially resilient.

Partnership is a much over-used word. But, if meant, if felt by both sides, if it is meaningful, genuine and balanced, it does work. It is not always easy – partnership is never easy – and we sometimes fear that partnership will dilute our own unique contributions, or that one side will subsume the other. But when it does work it can be a phenomenal force for good.

This is a hugely exciting and challenging time for colleges and for FE, as it is for Government. You want more money and I will always lobby for that. But what I do know is that together, in that partnership, we have a shared ambition for all of our learners, for all of our communities and for our country.

When the Prime Minister appointed me to this post, I don't think she was fully aware of my heartfelt beliefs about further education. (And just as an aside, I am also Minister for Women, and as a self-proclaimed born again feminist – and that's what politics does for you – I'm delighted to have that as well.) But somebody – and this is very personal – who has always said that university is not the right thing for everyone – irrespective of high grades it is still not always the right choice. And someone who probably didn't do as well as I should have done at school, who believes that everyone whatever their age deserves a choice, a second chance. Ladies and gentlemen, I got mine.

We together have a determination to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead.

Together – in partnership – I know that we can make this happen.