



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG meeting- Higher Education/Further Education Pathways
08:30-10:00, Tuesday 14 May, Terrace Dining Room B, House of Commons

Chair:

Lord Norton of Louth, Co-Chair of the APPUG

Speakers:

Professor Kathleen Armour, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education), University of Birmingham

Paul Fairburn, Director of Enterprise and Innovation, Coventry University

Stephen Fox, Director of Higher Education, University Campus St Albans

Professor Kathleen Armour opened her remarks by explaining how the relationship between the University of Birmingham (UoB) and University College Birmingham (UCB) evolved. Originally, her institution validated some of UCB's degrees and continues to do so with a selection of degrees despite UCB getting their own degree awarding powers. She stressed that the institutions had different strengths, explaining that UoB was a standard, large Russell Group institution, whereas UCB had a small student body of around 7,500, 50% of which were local commuter students, and specialised in food and tourism. The relationship is mutually beneficial as UoB contributed their research expertise and UCB brought years of experience teaching at levels 2-7.

Kathleen then went on to tell attendees about the progression pathway around engineering that came out of collaboration between South and City College, UCB and UoB and Catalyst funding from the Office for Students. The aim was to provide an alternative route for those that do not have a 'usual' engineering background, she said, explaining that students studied for a two-year foundation degree validated by UCB which included wrap-around study skills and support before progressing to UoB for a full degree. She spoke about the important role foundation degrees could, and used to, play in the tertiary education system and went on to give further details about employer involvement (including Arup and Network Rail) in order to address regional skills gaps, particularly through Industrial Advisory Boards.

Turning to the challenges around HE/FE collaboration, she highlighted the resource implications of curriculum development, the difficulty in meeting industry's needs, given how quickly things developed, and quality assurance across the partners. Forming the sort of pathway she described was very expensive and therefore Kathleen questioned whether this mode of collaboration was the most efficient or whether universities working with teachers and tutors in further education could be more effective.

Finally, she mentioned the difficulties in informing students about the sorts of opportunities the engineering pathway provided, noting that all of the students scope the course out themselves without their school's involvement. Pupils from the most challenged schools were the target for this programme, yet they were difficult to reach.

Paul Fairburn explained his role within the MIRA Technology Institute (MTI) and gave background to how the Institute was set up, namely that the automotive sector faced a huge challenge from disruptive organisations like Google and Uber entering the market. He went on to give statistics about the rising demand for designing and building autonomous and driverless vehicles.

MTI is a dedicated training facility for the automotive sector, opened in September 2018 and based on the Leicestershire/Warwickshire border, he explained, and he said there was a skills escalator within the institution that allowed people to study from level 2 up to PhD level whilst increasing their professional knowledge. The Institute delivers accredited and non-accredited provision - ranging from cyber security through to a wide range of engineering disciplines such as aerodynamics. The MTI is located on the MIRA Technology Park which also housed 40 businesses including Bentley, Bosch and Triumph, he added, highlighting the easy access to industry. Paul then gave further details about the Technology Park including about Coventry University's Centre for Connected and Autonomous Automotive Research.

In terms of challenges of setting MTI up, Paul said it had been difficult to articulate the full vision in the beginning, even between partner organisations and institutions. There was a shared desire to create innovative, lively, and creative yet state-of-the-art facilities, but bringing these elements together to realise a vision had proven a challenge. Differences in organisational culture had also been challenging, especially in terms of decision-making processes and competing institutional priorities too. He thought good governance from the beginning was essential, as well as bringing in leaders with both education and industry experience and having constant dialogue amongst partners in different areas of the project such as operations, curriculum development and business development.

Stephen Fox spoke about University Campus St Alban's, a small-scale, innovative model of collaboration that had been established between the University of Hertfordshire and Oaklands College and was focused on part-time education. The joint venture provided a legal structure by which the two education providers could come together as equals. He went on explain the partnership was more of a concept as it was housed within existing building and did not need fixed structures.

Giving context to why University Campus St Alban's was formed, he explained that in 2013 there was widespread belief that higher education was going to be deregulated which would allow more private providers to enter the sector. He also highlighted the problem that part-time numbers had declined by 50% between 2010 and 2015 and therefore the partnership could bring in 'lost learners'. Finally, the establishment of degree apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships had provided a new

opportunity for the venture as there was more emphasis on giving existing employees a second chance.

Stephen stressed that the student experience for part-time students was very different; 25-61 year olds had substantially different needs, and brought different things to their learning experience. Creating part-time and flexible provision was however very costly, he stressed, as evening and day release learners could not just be slotted into existing learning structures. Another innovative aspect of the partnership was the structures to recognise and accredit prior experience, he said, explaining this happened through translating experience into group learning through an assessed portfolio and leadership programme.

Summarising University Campus St Albans' aims, Stephen said they had tried to create accessible routes into higher education from further education and the workplace, create affordable programmes, help employers spend their levy funds on upskilling and enable mature learners to get recognition from their prior experience.