

Association of Colleges

Ladies and Gentlemen

With the next general election only 6 months away, this may be the only chance I get to address this fantastic community of further education colleges. So I want to start by taking a step back from particular issues of funding requirements and curriculum design and talk about the crucial role you play in our long term plan to secure a better economic future for the British people. My argument will focus on what you do for young

people, although I recognise the very valuable role you also play in helping adults acquire new skills.

As the Prime Minister outlined yesterday, just as the sun seems to be breaking through the clouds here at home, storms are gathering on the other side of the Channel – and elsewhere in our deeply interconnected world. After several years of stagnation following the financial crash and the devastating recession that it unleashed, the British economy is growing strongly. In the last four and a half years, British employers have created 1.75 million new jobs, more than all of the other 27 countries in the European Union combined.

Unemployment is falling, inflation is in check and interest rates remain very low.

But around the world the headwinds are blowing.

The Eurozone is on the cusp of recession. Japan has suffered a dramatic collapse in confidence, and both China and India are growing much less quickly than before the crash. This is a moment full of risk. The question for all of us, and the question for the British people next May, will be a simple one: who do you trust to steer a safe course through these storm-tossed seas?

What David Cameron and George Osborne offer you is a clear plan. Cutting the deficit so that investors have confidence in Britain's financial stability and interest rates remain low. Investing in infrastructure so that it becomes easier to link customers and suppliers, to match people up with jobs. So we can keep energy supplies flowing and make it easier and cheaper for people to communicate over the internet and on their mobiles.

But the most important bit of our plan, the essential component on which the success of the entire venture rests is education. You can have the best roads and railways in the world, the

fastest broadband, and the most robust public finances. If you are not preparing your young people for a long life of work, if you are not equipping them the range of knowledge and abilities that will make them productive and our country competitive, your plan will fail.

I am not one of those people who thinks that the only purpose of education is utilitarian, that its only goal is to make people economically productive.

But we need to be honest with the young people in our charge. They are a lot more likely to have a chance to enjoy sport, and the arts and the wonders of nature, to know the happiness of time spent with family and friends, to build a life full of

meaning and purpose, if they have the security of a regular salary and a decent pension. And these are things that only productive employment can provide.

The preparation of young people for working life has to start with a grasp of the two languages without which a person's access to modern life is grievously constrained: English and Maths.

I call them both languages for a reason. Maths is not a bunch of intellectual tricks: it is a way of describing the world around us. Those who lack a basic mastery of English and Maths lack the

means to navigate successfully through the modern world. They lack the tools to learn and adapt at every step along the way, which is the key to survival in a competitive environment.

I know that you embrace this responsibility and I want to thank you for everything you are doing to help your teaching staff get ready to help young people who have left schools with D grades retake their GCSEs. I have listened intently to concerns about the way we are implementing this new requirement that have been expressed by Martin, and Richard and many of the principals that I have met over the past few months. And I have looked

closely at some of the flexibilities that have been suggested to me.

I think that there may be some misunderstanding about what is proposed. If a student with D grades in English and Maths GCSEs joins you at 16 for a 2 year programme of study, we are not suggesting that she must be entered for both GCSEs exams in both of the years that she is with you. What we are asking is that she should be enrolled in both GCSE courses from the start and continue with each of them until she has secured the vital C grade. When, and how often, she sits the final exam during the two years will be for you and your student to decide.

I do understand however that it is not practical or fair to impose the same requirements on students taking courses of less than 150 hours – who are often young carers with a lot on their plates already. While we expect them to receive English and Maths tuition as part of their course, we will be waiving the requirement for them to study for standalone qualifications.

My overriding priority is this: I want any young person who has any conceivable chance of achieving a C grade in Maths and English GCSEs to be given every opportunity and all the necessary support to do so. We would be failing

them and putting their futures in jeopardy if we did any less.

Where I have found your arguments more persuasive is in relation to those students who have not secured D grades in English and Maths GCSEs – and who are unlikely to be retaking their GCSEs while they are at college. I believe it is vitally important that we offer them alternative qualifications that are high quality, consistent, understood by parents, and respected by employers. As you know, Ofqual is undertaking a review of functional skills qualifications and I eagerly await their findings.

But I am already certain that we need to go further.

So I have asked the Education and Training

Foundation under the outstanding David Russell to

work with employers, colleges and awarding

bodies to understand what kind of English and

Maths qualifications might give those who are not

able to pass GCSEs a certificate of real value.

Something that emphatically is not a soft option,

something practical and relevant but demanding,

something that will impress potential employers

and make their mothers and fathers proud.

The second responsibility which falls on your

shoulders is to offer young people the opportunity

to receive training with and through an actively

engaged employer. As a government we are very proud of our apprenticeships programme and are on track to sign up the 2 millionth apprentice of this Parliament. But this is not chiefly a numbers game. What matters is that following our reforms, apprenticeships must be jobs, based with employers, that they must be substantial, lasting more than 12 months, and that once the trailblazer programme is complete they will have to follow standards that have been created by groups of employers and which include a rigorous assessment at the end. David Cameron has committed a future Conservative government to deliver 3 million apprenticeships in the next Parliament – and I have to admit it made me gulp

when I first heard him say it. But I know that with your help, and with the growing commitment of employers large and small, we can achieve it – and transform the productivity of our workforce and the competitiveness of the British economy.

But not all young people are ready to start an apprenticeship or an entry-level job. In the past they would have taken courses with little or no connection to employers, when what they need most is to understand what is required in the world of work. That is why my predecessor Matt Hancock developed traineeships. And again I want to thank those of you who have been pioneers in the development of these crucial

stepping stones into productive employment. Now that concept has been tested, we want to increase the flexibility enjoyed by providers and expand the number of young people who can benefit from traineeships. So from January anyone aged from 19 to 24 with prior qualifications up to a full level 2 will be able to do a traineeship. I trust that you will now be able to achieve a dramatic expansion in the number of young people whose productive working lives start off on the stepping stone of a traineeship.

I hope you will forgive me if I conclude with some reflections on the coming election. I am not generally the most partisan of politicians. I see

good ideas and good people in most of the political parties that will be seeking your votes. And I respect the fact that many of you may have different political sympathies to my own.

But the next election is a moment when you and your colleagues, and even some of your current students will have to make a choice. Between two possible governments, one led by David Cameron and one led by Ed Miliband.

When you do so I hope you will ask yourself the following questions.

Who understands best the nature of the challenges that this country faces in this rapidly changing world, and of the risks to our future prosperity?

Who is most likely to produce the steady economic growth needed to generate enough tax revenues to pay for high quality education for all?

Who is most likely to ensure that businesses continue to invest and create rewarding jobs for the people - young and old – to whom you dedicate your lives?

There will be lots of other arguments in this election - and no shortage of noisy distractions.

But at its heart will be these fundamental questions. I don't need to tell you what I think the answer is. I hope that, however you voted in the past, in the privacy of the polling station on 7th May next year, you will find that you agree.

So that together, from 8th May, we can get on with the job of delivering an education system that offers the next generation the skills they need to secure productive work and build fulfilling lives.