



Re-imagining higher education

On Thursday 29 January Southampton Solent University's Sir James Matthews building was the venue for a lively debate on the subject of re-imagining higher education. The Solent area was well represented with a cross-section of local universities, businesses and trade associations all having their say.

Hosted jointly by the Right Honourable John Denham MP and Southampton Solent University, co-speakers were the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Graham Baldwin, and Brian Johnson, UK Business Development Director for BAE Systems Maritime and Chairman of the Solent Marine and Maritime Steering Group of the Local Enterprise Partnership, ensuring a well-rounded debate with perspectives from a politician, higher education and an important local employer.

John Denham opened up the debate by arguing there are three pressure points for change: in his view the current HE funding system is unsustainable; the cost to students is unacceptably high, and offers too little choice; too much higher education doesn't deliver what students and the wider economy need.

He questioned the existing university model of a system based on the 18-year-old student studying a three or four year degree away from home and running up huge debts, almost half of which are unlikely to be repaid. He argued for more options, such as a two-year intensive degree and more flexible learning options.

John said "The opportunities for older students, those who need or want to reduce costs by studying from home, or those who want to be supported by an employer are shrinking and, in their own way, damaging social mobility and the economy.

"This might not matter if higher education was delivering what students and employers want. But, despite the growth in graduate numbers, there are few signs that employers are becoming more satisfied with the supply of graduates."

Brian Johnson identified further challenges saying "We find that retention rates are much better for our own apprentices than it is with university graduates and this is something we would like the universities to help us with. Ideally we need to consider trying to achieve whole life employability."

Graham Baldwin recalled how, previously as National Skills Research Director for the NDA/Sellafield, it had proven difficult to get consensus with regard to what employers from within and across different businesses wanted from graduates and he outlined how Solent University was helping to address the problem. "At Solent University we will continue to emphasise real-world learning, we will make work experience a central part of our offer, we will look to be increasingly flexible and we will continue to be quick to respond to employers and student need."

Brian Johnson noted that recruiters in business and industry are far more interested in identifying well-rounded graduates with leadership and management skills, rather than purely focusing on qualifications and the institutions they are awarded from.

Graham went on to say that Brian's comments were borne out by Solent University data, which showed that three years after graduating, career achievement and the pay of our alumni compares favourably with sector averages.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT THE MEDIA OFFICE ON 023 82 013079 or press.office@solent.ac.uk

About Southampton Solent University

Southampton Solent University offers more than 23,000 students over 200 qualifications ranging from HND to PhD, in subjects such as maritime education and training, fashion and design, media and television, music, health, sport and leisure, business, IT and technology. The University was

awarded the 2013 Quality Assurance kitemark for quality and standards of teaching and learning. Solent was voted one of the most creative universities in the UK in a Which? University 2014 poll of students. Solent Business School has been awarded the Small Business Charter Award, which is supported by the Association of Business Schools and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and 'gold approval' by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA).