Vocational Partnerships

Reception speech by David Green CMG, Director-General of the British Council

Novotel London Euston  5 February 2003

Distinguished guests, friends and colleagues, I am delighted to welcome you all here this evening.

Vocational Partnerships is part of the British Council’s Education and Training Group, which acts as the hub for UK partners in vocational education and training. Ruth Gee and her team succeed only if they are up-to-date with UK policy and practice and connected to key players throughout the UK. It is therefore a pleasure to welcome those of you from government departments, from awarding bodies, from colleges and private providers, from those who hold the public purse, from professional bodies and trade bodies like the Association of Colleges and from elsewhere.

And of course the UK hub connects with partners elsewhere in the world. Tonight I offer a very warm welcome to the twenty-one people who have travelled from different parts of the globe to attend the seminar, organised by Vocational Partnerships, which has been held over the last three days… The names of the twenty-one are too many to read out, but I am pleased to see that they include not only my overseas British Council colleagues, but also people from the commercial trade sections in Delhi, Libya and Malaysia.

So tonight is partnership in action. I am convinced of the importance of building links between education and enterprise, between the world of knowledge and the world of work. Vocational Partnerships is a positive example of how we make it work.

When I was in Bangkok last year I met with the Federation of Thai Industries and the British Chambers of Commerce. They were consolidating links between enterprise and education, which had been initiated by the Vocational Partnerships team. The work has led to an ongoing dialogue for the first time between industry and colleges in Thailand and to the development of new training initiatives in retail and the food sector. I saw this in action in a Boots store just around the corner from our office in Siam Square…

It is an ongoing success story. It has also fed into the work we are doing on the Prime Minister’s Initiative to attract more international students to the UK.

Everyone here knows Ruth Gee well, so you know that by nature she is not self-effacing! So she will tell you that there has been an increase of forty-seven per cent in Thai students coming to study further education in the UK since she started working there in 1997. We know that the number of 560 includes family members and friends of her Thai partners, who have spent time at Solihull College. But she is modest enough to acknowledge that most of the 560 are the result of our UK branding and promotion work and not her universal networks. And she definitely isn’t claiming credit for the 705 per cent increase in Chinese students – a marked 4,660 in further education – since she first went to China in 1996/97.

In the British Council we attach the highest priority to working in collaboration and partnership; we do not work in the 109 countries in which we are represented so much as with our friends and partners in each of these countries. Tomorrow’s conference, to be held in this attractive location, is another expression of those partnerships. May I give a particular thank you to our guest speakers from the UK and also from South Africa. I appreciate the commitment to the British Council that your attendance demonstrates.
It is no coincidence of course that our international guest speakers, Mr Boitumelo Mape and Ms Peliwe Lolwana, come from South Africa. Not only are they key business and policy-making figures, but also from a country in which Ruth has particularly enjoyed working over the past four years. I understand that if you visit the offices of the Ministry of Education in Pretoria and say that you are from the UK, they will ask you if you know Ruth Gee. And woe betide you if you don’t!!

Many of you may know that tonight’s reception and tomorrow’s conference are probably Ruth’s last public platform appearances in the UK. I was delighted to appoint her recently to become Director of the Hong Kong operation from June this year. She has made her mark in the London operation through her professional knowledge and skills, her regular feedback to the corporate team, her high professional standards and her commitment to her own team’s development. Rod Pryde is being work shadowed soon by Nicole, and John Nance will have Julia as his shadow in Delhi for four days. Others have been shadowing elsewhere and you may be one of the many who have been persuaded by Ruth (and that means put in an arm lock until you say yes) to take part in her work shadowing for all programmes.

She won’t take no for an answer if it involves the FE sector! A Welsh college-spokesman told me recently that, three years ago, Welsh colleges had no dialogue with the BC. Now they are in regular contact with our Cardiff office and our Vocational Partnerships team in London. The same is true in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Ruth – your achievements have been significant. You have raised the profile of the British Council’s work in further education. You have been invited to represent the UK accompanying ministers on official missions to Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Oman, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and South Africa. With just the exception of Argentina, we now have exciting VET[Vocational Education and Training] work going on in all these countries.

The Skills Agenda is now recognised as a global one and we will continue work in this area with the energy and commitment that is Ruth’s hallmark. Our work with Trade Partners UK, as well as with the DfES, is very important to us and I’m pleased to have the opportunity this evening to say that formally as well as in the informal conversations we are all enjoying.

Carry on that enjoyment. I hope those of you attending the conference tomorrow will find it a useful forum for sharing ideas and opportunities. Thank you again for coming.