As many of you return from the summer break I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your colleagues on governing bodies, college senior management teams, staff and students for the excellent work done across the FE system this year.

Success rates for colleges have risen from 65% in 2001/02 to 75% in 2004/05, the learner completion for ‘full framework’ apprenticeships is up from 24% to 40% in the same period and colleges and providers are on track to meet the current targets. This year’s results confirm rising quality and standards in further education.

The overall A Level pass rate has increased for the 24th consecutive year, from 96.2% to 96.6%. These are excellent results and reflect the hard work of both students and their lecturers.

The coming year will be important for us all in the context of the White Paper for Further Education: Raising Skills Improving Life Chances. On the whole, you have welcomed the proposals and the opportunity to input to the debate. As college governors, you have a key role to play in reviewing the mission of your institutions in line with the new economic focus for the FE system.

You have responded keenly to the consultation around the future of FE governance, and particularly welcomed the proposal for increased flexibility in the composition of the college corporation. This would allow colleges total freedom to identify those external stakeholders best able to contribute to governance, reflecting the needs of your own communities and circumstances.

Pursuing excellence is a key theme in the White Paper, and this autumn will see the launch of the full national Improvement Strategy (IS) led by the Quality Improvement Agency in conjunction with other organisations. Linked to this, there will be the LSC's intervention strategy to tackle under-performance, its new 'Framework for Excellence', and further steps in relation to learning and teaching improvements, including continuing professional development.

I urge you as college governors to contribute your views on the outline IS and the 'Framework'. I firmly believe that the responsibility for improvement has to lie with individual institutions rather than national bodies, so your views on what works and the type of support you would welcome, are really needed.

The White Paper also raised the profile of equality and diversity. This year we will see the implementation of new legislation covering Age Discrimination in October 2006, Disability Equality in December 2006 and Gender Equality in April 2007. These developments present a real opportunity for college governors to provide firm leadership in responding to and delivering real
change in respect of diversity.

We in Government need to help you in your work by setting a clear strategic framework with systems which are unbureaucratic and maximise autonomy. Over the next 12 months we will work with you and other partners to simplify administration and improve our delivery chains; and to act on what you tell us is happening locally, what works, and what is getting in the way.

There is much to do, but there are already many things going on in the FE system to be proud of. The importance of the FE sector is something I talked about in the House back in June. Unfortunately, there was a misprint in Hansard which caused both you and me great concern. Let me take this opportunity to set the record straight. What I actually said was that the FE sector is much more of a priority now – not, as the misprint said – that the FE sector is much more of a problem now. I am sure you will agree that there is a big difference! Hansard has been corrected.

As I have already said, we have a busy time ahead. We look forward to working with you in the coming year, in particular at the Association of Colleges in November where Bill Rammell and I will be able to set out in more detail progress on implementing the White Paper, and thank you in person for your commitment to reforming the FE system.

Alan Johnson