

Skills Gap debate highlights weakness in national curriculum

A lively debate ensued at the latest meeting of the Sussex Manufacturing Forum between panel members from secondary schools, FE colleges and universities and Forum members over the increasing problem of a lack of suitable candidates entering the manufacturing and engineering professions. Frustrations were clear as FE colleges and universities can only supply the relevant courses if (and only if) there is enough demand for them. Encouraging more pupils at secondary schools to take STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) through both GCSE and A level routes will help towards this.

Panel member Keith McCormick, Assistant Head Teacher at Blatchington Mill School, Hove, who trained as a Production Engineer, explained how government policy requiring schools to follow traditional academic routes together with the effects of the Wolf Report has resulted in fewer pupils considering more vocational subjects, such as design and engineering.

Nicola Midgely, Head of Rye College, East Sussex, made a valuable point about engagement with manufacturers, which was echoed throughout the meeting. The process of apprentice matching by building partnerships with would-be employers was then described by Damien Leach from Chichester College. Dr Shona Campbell, Head of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership at Brighton University, completed the circle by looking at the ways in which the University of Brighton engages with manufacturers and engineers to place graduates for internships, specific projects and ultimately for employment.

Chris Coopey, one of the facilitators of the Forum and head of the Manufacturing Group at Carpenter Box chartered accountants, commented: “We all gained a fascinating insight into the challenges and frustrations that education providers face in encouraging and providing young people with the skills required to enter the manufacturing profession. Manufacturers need new talent to develop and grow in the future which is what the sector is being encouraged to do. More engagement is needed between the education and manufacturing sectors, but the basic problem of there being not enough young people being encouraged into the sector will not be resolved until government understands that the education system needs to be specifically tasked with producing the skills that the nation needs, instead of obsessing about academic subjects for academic sake.”

The Sussex Manufacturing Forum is free to attend for manufacturing and engineering companies and is sponsored by UKTI, HSBC Bank plc and Carpenter Box chartered accountants and tax advisors. It will continue to facilitate discussions between the education and manufacturing and engineering sectors to promote and cement local links. Manufacturers and engineers can get more information and sign up at www.sussexmanufacturingforum.com