

'Inspiring learners' – Inspiring colleagues

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I very much enjoyed learning, listening and contributing to the Inspiring Learners teaching and learning conference in July 2010. Although most participants were from the University of Greenwich, the day had a welcoming and collegial 'feel', reinforced by the spectacular campus and buildings from the time of the Restoration. The views across the Thames, to the O2 Arena, the 'Gherkin' (30 St Mary Axe) and Canary Wharf were striking.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic Development) Simon Jarvis, emphasised three key graduate skills: communication, critical thinking and problem-solving. He went on to pose the question: 'What makes an individual university unique and attractive?' and pinned 'his colours to the mast' by asserting that 'the learners will inherit the earth'. This emphasis on belonging and pride in place of education was developed by David Robinson, the co-founder of Community Links and an adviser to the last Labour government. He gave a 'barnstorming' performance and threw down gauntlet after gauntlet; for example, citing Nelson Mandela: "Vision without action is daydreaming; action without vision is merely passing the time!" In other words, analysis is crucial in order to plot a path towards realising an overriding vision. The danger is that enthusiasts with such vision dive in without serious thought for the consequences.

David Robinson presented four attributes that graduates should exit from university with:

- Restlessness – for knowledge
- Ambition – a willingness to embark on graded/graduated challenges
- Resilience – to learn from mistakes
- Confidence – an expectation of achievement and success.

Sarah Sunderland, from the University of Greenwich, put forward a powerful case for volunteering as a route to such talents. A survey in 2009–10 of some 1,500 London University students recorded 83% claiming greater self-confidence plus an interest in trying new things. She went on to highlight that 'volunteering whilst studying at university provides opportunities for learning a wide range of different skills, which in turn are useful for students' future employability, regardless of age or degree type.'

David Robinson bluntly asserted that without risk there can be no progress and that (inevitable) 'failures' fall into two camps – 'good' failures where you learn through your mistakes and 'bad' ones which demotivate, destroy and result from incompetence.

Professor James Wisdom – an academic consultant – rounded off the day with a sobering and wry tour of 'the planet higher education'. He noted state investment of £34,300 per student for their university education and that government and society, in the words of the Secretary of State (Vince Cable, 15 July 2010) "need to rethink how we fund them, and what we expect them to deliver for the public support they receive." Learners investing £50,000 plus – in the form of student debt accumulated by the end of their degree – should expect inspirational teaching and learning as payback for their investment of time, money and energy.