

FDF President, Jim Moseley's speech to the FDF parliamentary reception 12th July 2011

My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow food and drink manufacturers and friends of the industry, welcome to the FDF Summer Parliamentary Reception.

Minister, I know you have to rush off to a cabinet meeting but thank you for taking the time to address our reception. You've said before that DEFRA is now a department with a strong economic focus and we applaud that aspiration. It is vital if we are to continue to work together to build on the success of our industry.

In May I unveiled FDF's plan to commission research into sustainable growth opportunities for the UK food and drink manufacturing industry.

This lighthouse project will assess the where long-term growth in the sector could come from, will capture the actions required to generate growth in food and drink manufacturing and recommend how the industry can defend its competitive position in domestic and foreign markets. This is an important piece of work and will I hope provide new insights and ideas. But I know already that if you asked the assembled group today – or any grouping of food industry leaders, the one area they would all mention without fail is their concern about the supply of talented, skilled individuals that will grow their businesses in the future.

On the demand side we know that one third of the food industry will retire in the next 15 years and that by 2017, the sector will require 137,000 new recruits because of that ageing workforce. Demand for talented skilled people will be high in food and drink manufacturing.

And what about the supply side? Well we know that from next year, two-thirds of universities will charge the maximum fee rate of £9000 and that there will be a declining number of 18-24 year-olds over the next decade. This means that we could see a 14% decline in British higher education (HE) student numbers by 2020.

Given these huge changes in Higher Education, the food and drink manufacturing industry will have to compete even harder against industries that are perceived to be more exciting and rewarding to attract highly talented graduates for the future. The first signs of trouble are already upon us - 1 in 5 food scientist vacancies is already hard to fill.

So you can see that these are significant and in some cases very immediate challenges. That's why the Food Chain Skills Action Plan that the Minister referred to is so important.

FDF and its members have taken a lead role in developing the Action Plan and contributing to a number of important themes that have emerged. We've led on the development of initiatives to address the image and perception of the industry such as our campaign 'Taste Success – A future in Food'. In phase one, we've used real life case studies so that young people who have secured good jobs in food and drink can share their experiences. In the second phase we will reach out and engage with young people through social media. As food marketeers we know that Generation 'Y' is hard to get to but if we talk with them rather than at them and let them discover for themselves what a future in food looks like then this will be a powerful communication tool.

Then there's our initiative north of the border, 'A Future in Food' which received grant funding from the Scottish Government and is currently being rolled out in primary and secondary schools across Scotland. SFDF have also developed two short careers films 'A World of Opportunities' and 'A Future in Food' – which you can pick up here today – demonstrating the passion and commitment to working in our industry and the skills and diversity of jobs on offer.

We applaud the proposal in the Action Plan to develop a network of food chain ambassadors to tell our story to potential recruits and communicate what it's really like to work in food. We know this works; the existing pilot ambassador programme in Northern Ireland see volunteers from the industry go into schools to communicate directly with young people. In Scotland the Government will fund an ambassador programme while closer to home, the sector under the auspices of our Sector Skills Council, Improve has bid for support from the Growth Innovation Fund to establish a similar programme in England.

We know that we'll have to compete for the best graduates in the future and that we need to find ways of maintaining the flow of highly talented individuals. We therefore want to work with one or possibly two universities to deliver FDF's Graduate Ambition - a new degree course which will equip graduates with the skills that the food and drink industry requires. Now of course, businesses will differ in the level of support they may be able to provide and so we've developed a menu of options to frame how our members might participate. Businesses may decide to sponsor individuals on the course, they may offer short-term work experience as part of a sandwich degree or agree to employ a certain percentage of graduates who have completed the course.

Of course university isn't for everyone. A point made by the Minister for Universities and Science David Willetts when he called on young people to consider apprenticeships. In the food and drink industry we currently rely on an ageing workforce to power our growth without a ready supply of young people to be the engineers, team leaders or managers of the future. Apprenticeships will be key to attracting that talent of the future.

Many of our members have ambitious apprenticeship plans already in place. I'm delighted that many of our members have committed to significantly increase the numbers of apprenticeship places next year. We'll be working with the National Skills Academy and the National Apprenticeships Service to make this increase as straightforward as we can for businesses.

We're clear that it isn't enough to just talk up a career in the food and drink industry. Taste Success will get young people interested and dispel the myths about a future in food; the ambassador programme, funding permitting, will bring those careers to life; the creation of a new degree course and our support for graduates through sponsoring, mentoring or work experience and the creation of new apprenticeship opportunities demonstrates our commitment to providing certainty for young people seeking employment in the food and drink industry. This is about providing young people with a future in food so that we can secure the future of our industry.

It only remains for me to thank John Stevenson for his sponsorship of this event and his ongoing support through his role as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Food and Drink Manufacturing Group. I would encourage the Parliamentarians here today to join. We're incredibly grateful that many of you are helping to change the perceptions of manufacturing as a whole but food and drink manufacturing also needs strong advocates whether it's on the floor of the House or with young people in your constituencies.

I would also like to thank Jim Paice for his warm words of support and to thank you all for coming today and for your continued support of the food and drink industry. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon.