Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture

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The Tyranny of Conventional Wisdom

Martin Bean, Vice-Chancellor of The Open University

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Foreword

Sir John Cass's Foundation is a leading City of London based independent educational charity, which promotes participation and achievement in education. It takes its name from Sir John Cass (1661–1718) who was a City of London politician and philanthropist.

The Foundation not only supports eight educational institutions in the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, which bear the name of the Founder, but has also provided substantial assistance to a large number of major educational initiatives in London and further afield.

The Sir John Cass Foundation Lecture is given annually by a high profile policy maker or commentator at the Cass Business School in London and seeks to advance debate about the future of the provision of education in our country.

The inaugural lecture took place in 2007 and given the success of this, and subsequent lectures, has now become an annual event. The Lecture is now published and widely disseminated to educationalists, politicians and other interested parties across the country.

Addresses have been given by Lord Adonis, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools in 2007/08; Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in 2008/09; Michael Gove, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in 2009/10; Dr Anthony Seldon, the Master of Wellington College in 2010/11; Katharine Birbalsingh in 2011/12, the educationalist and former Deputy Head Teacher of St Michael & All Angels Church of England Academy who spoke at the Conservative Party Conference in 2010; Dr Vince Cable, the Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills 2012/13 and by Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield in 2013/14.

This year the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture was delivered by Martin Bean, the Vice-Chancellor of the Open University. It was entitled 'The Tyranny of Conventional Wisdom' and the Foundation is very grateful indeed that it has been given permission to film and to publish the transcript of this year's lecture.

The Lecture examined amongst others things whether technology can transform and enrich education thereby enabling leaders and educators to do better by their students. The Foundation has been aware for a number of years of the significant work that has been undertaken by the Open University (OU) in the areas of widening participation and prisoner education. It was particularly keen to learn more about the proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses, better known as MOOCs and FutureLearn sponsored by the OU, the UK's first MOOC Platform, which was launched in October 2013.

The Foundation is indebted to all eight speakers including Martin Bean, who has now moved to the RMIT University (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) in Australia. He deservedly received a CBE in the 2015 New Year's Honours List for services to higher education and we wish him well for the future.

Kevin Everett
Treasurer and Chairman
Sir John Cass's Foundation

The Tyranny of Conventional Wisdom

Thank you, Kevin, for that great introduction and thanks also to Steve, Richard Foley and Ray Ellis for inviting me to be here tonight to share some thoughts with all of you. I'm truly honoured to join your prestigious list of past speakers including Lord Hennessy, Dr Vince Cable and Sir Anthony Seldon, to name just a few.

When I was asked to submit the topic of my remarks tonight, the choice was surprisingly easy. I knew I wanted to focus on the tyranny of conventional wisdom, particularly in education where "disruptive innovation" is forcing us to reconsider the very foundations of learning and teaching. Luckily, challenging conventional wisdom is something I've been doing all my life and I believe that, together, we can resist its siren song.

By UK standards I am not your usual vice-chancellor. I was born and raised in Melbourne Australia, educated in Sydney and met my wife in Côte D'Ivoire. We got married in Belgium before heading to the US where we lived for 15 years and had our three American daughters. And now I live in Milton Keynes.

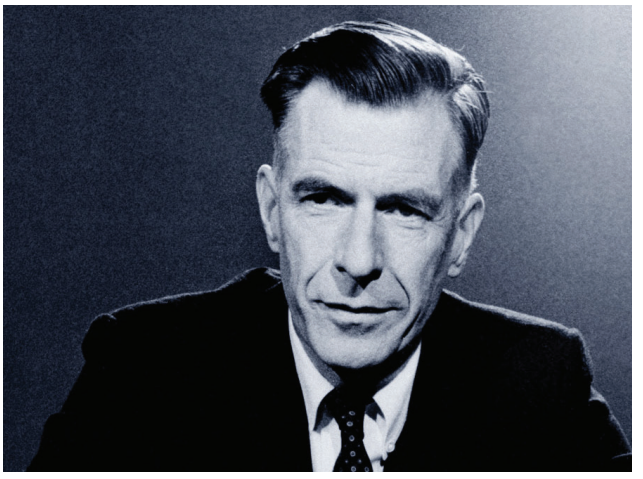
And in a few short weeks, I'll go full circle and head home to Melbourne to take up the role of Vice-Chancellor and President of RMIT University.

Throughout all that change there have been two real constants in my life – one of them is my family, the other is the fact that I've been working and studying at the intersection of education and technology. Throughout my career I've been guided by one strongly held belief; that when we truly have the best interests of our students at heart, when we put aside our pre-conceived ideas about what constitutes "proper" learning and teaching, we have the ability to harness the power of education – and use it to change lives for the better.

That isn't to say that the newest thing is always the best, or that we should just jump on the latest and greatest technological bandwagon, but we must be wary of staying in our comfort zones, of letting the warm blanket of conventional wisdom keep us cosy and safe – because cosy and safe can sometimes mean isolated, outmoded or, worse still, obsolete.

In 1950's America, there was an overwhelming consensus that growth was good. This was the era of Mad Men and Madison Avenue, where people enjoyed rising affluence and increasing prosperity, in a society where memories of the Depression still cast a long shadow. Government, business, the press, the public: all agreed that the defining principle of economic policy was to promote growth.

When an idea like that takes hold, it takes real guts to say something different. Because as far as everyone was concerned, this was no longer just an 'idea' but 'the truth.' As a result, people were blind to the consequences.



In this context, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote his ground breaking text 'The Affluent Society'. Everyone was so focused on growth, no one was looking at the impact: environmental degradation, rising inequality, rampant consumerism. The theory of growth was no longer helping America progress but actually holding it back. Worse, no one was coming up with a better idea because everyone accepted the basic premise.

Galbraith coined the phrase 'conventional wisdom' to articulate this wider principle. The world moves on and conventional wisdom quickly becomes out of date. But still people cling to old certainties in an uncertain world. He argued for more independent thinking and a willingness to challenge underlying assumptions: not just in economics, but in politics, business and society.

Fast forward five years, and the Cuban Missile Crisis saw conventional wisdom at its worst. The US was desperately searching Cuba, using aerial photography, to try and locate where the nuclear devices were hidden. As you would expect, they were looking for a high security facility, swarming with KGB, isolated behind checkpoints and roadblocks, with imposing fences and miles of razor wire.

But they were barking up the wrong tree. The Soviets had been in such a hurry to get the missiles in place that they had abandoned all the usual protocols and rules. Instead, the devices were on an abandoned chicken farm, with the door left wide open. The Americans had actually taken photographs of the very site. But they were so blinded by their preconceptions, so blinkered by conventional wisdom, that they literally couldn't see what they were seeing. They had assumed that because something had always been done in a certain way, it would always be done in a certain way. Michael Dobbs described this as 'the tyranny of conventional wisdom,' and you see it in all walks of life.

It's a combination of assumption, inertia, scepticism and fear of change and it creates a toxic mix which hampers creativity, stifles innovation, and holds back progress. One of the deadliest phrases in the English language is: 'because that's the way we've always done it.' It's kind of like an adult version of: "Because I said so" – those dreaded words we've all heard as children, and swore (mostly unsuccessfully) that we'd never use as parents- and it closes down debate just as effectively and with just as much frustration.

By contrast, the strongest and most inspiring sentences begin: 'I wonder what would happen if.....' When people aren't afraid to challenge conventional wisdom: that's when the magic happens.

It's the sort of creativity which quite literally took man to the moon. If conventional wisdom had been allowed to prevail, Neil Armstrong might never have taken his small step for man.

Throughout much of the Apollo 11 design process, the lunar lander featured a pair of large, comfy seats for the two-man crew. Flying machines have always had seats, and the designers assumed that they always would. Unfortunately the seats were so heavy that weight savings had to be found elsewhere. This led to a surreal process in which the ladder was removed, replaced instead with a knotted rope that astronauts could use to haul themselves to and from the lunar surface.

Fortunately, two relatively junior engineers named George Franklin and Louie Richard were willing to stand up to conventional wisdom, pointing out that for a short, low-gravity flight there was no need for seats at all. The pilots could simply fly standing up.

It took a while to convince the powers that be, but in the end the seats were removed. They took with them a huge amount of weight, leaving enough spare capacity for that previously troublesome ladder. The rest, as they say, is history. The Eagle landed, the knotted rope was left at home, and Armstrong was spared the indignity of taking one small dangle for man, and one giant swing for mankind.

In the world of education, conventional wisdom has students sitting at desks, facing a teacher who stands at the front doing his or her level best to impart knowledge. It's a model that has endured for literally thousands of years.

Look at Raphael's depiction of Plato's Academy, the Western world's first higher education institution. You've got Plato, at the front of the class in a fetching pink and purple toga, and around him are his pupils, sat down at their little stone desks listening to him and dutifully taking notes. Ask a modern child anywhere in the world to draw a school and you'll get a pretty similar picture, albeit one that is unlikely to make it onto the walls of the Vatican.

That's not to say this method of teaching doesn't work. It certainly never did Aristotle any harm, and I'm sure many of you are delivering or have previously received a fantastic education in this way.

But as The Open University has proved over the past four decades, it's not the only way to teach. Which is just as well, because in the 21st century students themselves are demanding new, more engaging ways of teaching and learning.

The onset of technology is one of the most significant forces we have ever experienced, in hundreds of thousands of years. And we can't expect students to engage in the traditional model – passive, obedient, one-dimensional – just because 'that's the way we've always done it.' That's not the way they live their their lives and interact with their world – and they deserve better.

Today's young people are 'digital natives.' They have grown up swiping and clicking as well as reading and writing: their smartphones are glued to their hands. They can't conceive of a world before google, YouTube and twitter. When they have a question, they google the answer. When they want to know what's happening, they check Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and a million other forms of social media. They have friends living thousands of miles away and may spend hours chatting to them each day even though they've never met.

A recent *Variety* magazine survey found that the five most influential people for American teenagers today are vloggers, who are perceived as more authentic and relatable than the traditional Hollywood celebrities. I'm willing to bet that a sizeable proportion of this audience isn't even sure what a vlogger is. Today, it's all about smartphones: tomorrow, it will all be about wearables like google glass; and you can be sure it won't stop there.

If education doesn't keep up with this changing environment, it will not only be a missed opportunity but worse, we risk the sector becoming irrelevant and even irresponsible. It is vital that today's education equips young people with the skills and confidence they need to operate in today's world: online as well as offline. Most of them will graduate into jobs which will have technology at their core; perhaps jobs we can't even conceive of today. They need to develop the ability to filter, interpret and assess all the information they are bombarded with, every moment of the day; and we must help them turn that information into meaningful knowledge.

Of course, the challenges that we are facing in education are being faced in business too. Think of all those big high street names – brands we thought would always be there – who failed to meet the challenges of the digital age and have had to shut up shop: from Jessop's to Woolworths.

And, of course, many of us will remember Borders books. Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Borders first opened for business back in the 70s and, at its peak, employed over 19,000 people across hundreds of superstores, airport shops and outlets.

Borders had a strong brand, a fierce program of expansion and yet by mid-2011 they were closing their doors for good. Why? Because they were so busy doing what they'd always done – selling a fantastic range of books in a great environment – that they simply didn't see that the world was changing around them.

Borders were so focussed on the customers they'd always had, that they couldn't see the customers they were missing. Those who preferred ebooks or who wanted to buy their books over the internet rather than coming into a store. Their ill-fated decision to outsource their online sales to Amazon sounded the death knell of a once-thriving business, their empty stores serving as a sad reminder of the dangers of complacency.

From book selling to journalism to the music industry: all business and industry is having to, as Pieter Willem Botha famously put it, "adapt or die".

But for every horror story there is a success. Flagship companies like John Lewis are showing how to mix technology with tradition through the 'clicks and bricks' model which is bringing online retail

and the high street closer together, with great success. Far from eroding or diminishing the brand, John Lewis's online presence is enhancing and strengthening it.

Perhaps the most difficult thing for those of us in higher education to get to grips with is the sheer pace of change. It's been so rapid that in a sense, there has been no time for conventional wisdom to develop. At first there were many more questions than answers. How would technology change higher education, when so much knowledge is now available for free at the swipe of a screen? How would increased tuition fees impact on student demand? How would the British higher education system be able to compete in a globalised marketplace for education? Perhaps if there was such a thing as conventional wisdom it would be: wait and see.

But the trouble is that the rest of the world isn't waiting and seeing. The Americans, the Australians are adopting these new technologies, transforming their learning and teaching and presenting a new face to students throughout the world. How can we continue to make sure that higher education in the United Kingdom is not only competitive but a genuine world leader, without also embracing the opportunities for technology enhanced learning? It's not only the right thing to do for our students, it's the only way we will protect a sector that generates over £8 billion pounds of export earnings every year.

As I said earlier, I don't believe we should be exploring technology in education just 'because everyone else is doing it.' We shouldn't be doing it because we are carried away with enthusiasm for the latest gadget. We should be doing it because if harnessed correctly, technology has the potential to enhance and improve the student experience. Technology cannot replace teaching. But it can transform and enrich it.

So the question is, how can technology help us as leaders and educators do a better job for our students?

One recent example of transformation can be seen in the proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses, better known as MOOC's.

FutureLearn, sponsored by the OU, is the first UK MOOC platform. It was launched in October 2013 and has taken the world by storm. We celebrated its first birthday last month, having welcomed over 1.4 million course sign ups with our 40 world-class partners. As proud as I am of this achievement, we've only just got started; the vision for FutureLearn's is to pioneer the best learning experiences for everyone, anywhere.

But I don't want to get caught up in what the Gartner hype cycle would refer to as the peak of inflated expectations. Though millions of people around the world are taking advantage of the ability to study a vast array of subjects for low or no cost, a recent survey suggested that fewer than one in ten people in the UK have heard of MOOCs: let alone taken one.

Now there are two possible responses to that sort of statistic. Some people will say 'I told you this would never catch on,' and there are many sceptics and curmudgeons who are only too delighted to dive into Gartner's trough of disillusionment. But the second response is to recognise that innovation rarely catches on immediately. There are few true overnight successes in this world. It will take time to create awareness and for that to translate into adoption. And it's vital in the meantime that we don't assume that just because the public isn't familiar with MOOCs that they aren't interested.

I think most of us can understand, and even feel comfortable with the idea that this sort of online teaching is being used to reach new audiences. More interesting and unexpected, perhaps, is the way that MOOCs are shifting what's going on in the rest of university life.

At the University of Southampton they're blending the experiences of on-campus students with that of MOOC students; facilitating global dialogue and a much more interactive learning community. The University of Strathclyde has taken their Introduction to Forensic Science MOOC and re-delivered it for credit in their own virtual learning environment. And the University of Bristol is using their Cracking Mechanics MOOC to better prepare students for Year 1 study.

Put more broadly, the MOOC space is a fantastic place in which to experiment – with things like self-assessment, practical experimentation and video-based resources. It's somewhere where you can "play" a little bit; do fun things, relatively quickly, and watch what happens.

There's some fantastic work being done, but we need to keep our foot on the accelerator of innovation, to think bigger; not just about reaching new audiences but about revolutionizing the traditional learning and teaching experience.

Because that's exactly what our students want. It's not enough to just throw a load of laptops into the lecture hall and think the job is done. To make the most of technology in the classroom, it can't be an add-on: it has to be an integral part of the educational experience.

There's a Nobel Prize-winning physicist named Carl Wieman and, being a scientist, he decided to run some tests on the people taking his course. He wanted to know how much of what he presented in the lecture theatre was actually being retained by his students when they were in the lab.

Polls were conducted. Evidence was pored over. Outcomes were analysed. And when the final results were in? Carl was crushed. Retention levels were alarmingly low. And this was for a course run by a real hotshot. Carl had a masters from MIT, a PHD from Stanford and had been named "Professor of the Year" for the whole of the United States. Yet even his students were not actually learning very much from lectures.

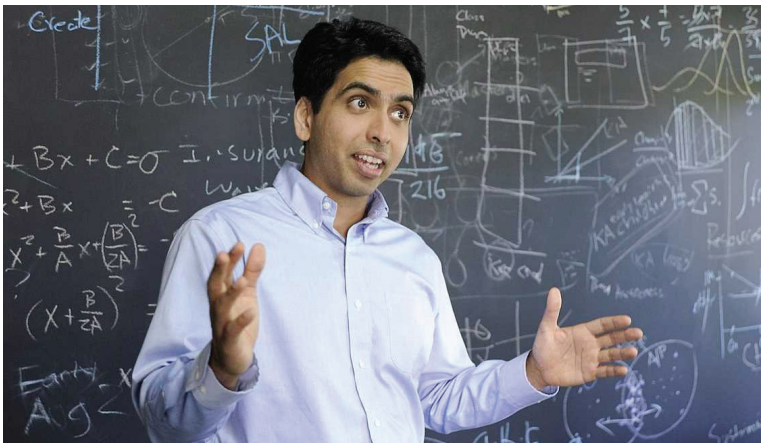
So he did what any good scientist would do, he broke the problem down. He dismantled his whole way of teaching and built it again from the bottom up in a way designed to boost retention. The first step was to podcast all of his normal lectures and study materials and ask his students to look at them over the summer before their course began. Then when they arrived in the autumn, he handed each of them a little clicker, a voting button. And he presented a whole new lecture, one based around asking questions of his students and gathering answers via the clickers. So he'd ask a question and, in real time, the results went up on the screen behind him.

He'd end up with one of three outcomes. The first is that everybody understood the question – which was great, everyone's learned something, we can move on. The second was that nobody got it – in which case Carl knew he'd need to go over things again, make it all that little bit clearer. And the third result was the best of all – a split. Some got it, some didn't. Some students in agreement, some objecting. This was great because now Carl had a debate on his hands. A debate he could facilitate. Instead of a one-sided lecture, it was a multi-faced conversation. People were talking to each other, developing their own ideas, challenging each other's assumptions. Carl had moved from being the sage on the stage to the coach on the side, encouraging and cajoling rather than simply lecturing.

The whole dynamic moved from a scientist talking at his audience to a group of intelligent individuals talking with each other. And when that happened the students' heads went up, laptop lids went down, and retention rates went through the roof.

The most important aspect of this little tale is that Carl didn't use a huge amount of expensive kit – just a video, a website and some simple polling. What made the difference wasn't the technology itself, but Carl having the courage to use it in an innovative way, the courage to deconstruct the pedagogy and reconstruct it in a way that suited the 21st century.

This is what's called 'the flipped classroom.' It fundamentally challenges the conventional wisdom in education. The lecturer's voice is no longer the only one that counts. The students are not assumed to be sponges soaking up wisdom. Instead, they are responsible for taking control of their own learning.



The Khan Academy is perhaps the most famous example of the flipped classroom. It started when Salman Khan wanted to help his cousin Nadia with her maths homework so he made her a YouTube clip. Ten years later and ten million people a month are watching Khan Academy videos. It's the biggest school in the world and Bill Gates has called Khan 'the world's favourite teacher.' It gives students the best of both worlds – someone sat next to you at the kitchen table explaining the way through a problem – but without actually hovering there and putting you off.

More and more teachers are using Khan Academy videos so that students can cover the basics at home, so that valuable class time can be used to check understanding. Imagine a classroom where students carry out their work on a tablet rather than an exercise book: so that teachers can play it back and see not just what they did but how they did it. It brings a whole new meaning to the expression 'show your working.'

At RMIT University, the institution I'm going to be joining shortly, they've taken this even further and are completely reshaping the built environment to support peer-to-peer interaction. Working intensively with their academic community, they've come up with a way to embed technology into the on-campus experience. It's all cloud based, taking out the need for hundreds of hot computer labs, and rather than just lecture halls, it uses a variety of diverse spaces which encourage conversation. And the key to all this is an acceptance… more than that – an embracing – of the principle that spaces outside the traditional classrooms can be just as energising as those within it, giving students the freedom, choice and responsibility to manage their own learning.

The Open University, which I have been privileged to lead over the last five years, was born out of a challenge to conventional wisdom. The conventional wisdom that says learning happens in a classroom; that university follows right on from school; that students are young and fresh-faced; that traditional qualifications are the necessary passport to higher education.

We were created to become a disruptive force in education. Flying in the face of conventional wisdom is hardwired into our DNA: whether in our admissions policies, in pioneering distance learning, or in partnerships with business. This has given us a different perspective, a willingness to take risks and to try new ways of doing things.

In particular, we are no strangers to the benefits of technology. We have always used the technology of the day to reach out to our students – and potential students. And I believe this gives us a responsibility to continue to position ourselves at the forefront of the digital revolution in education. This is reflected not just in the development of FutureLearn, but also the 65 million plus downloads we've had on iTunesU, the 6 million views each year of the videos we share on our YouTube channel and the fact that our undergraduates can get all of their course material digitally – not just on their PC but on mobile devices too. Earlier this year we installed Baroness Martha Lane Fox as our new Chancellor, making a strong and powerful statement of intent about what we stand for, and where we want to go next.

But that's not to say it's been easy. And if it's difficult for us at the Open University, then it's even more difficult in traditional institutions. Many of us belong to institutions which are decades, even centuries, old. We are very proud of the legacies we have inherited and of the 'way things are done round here.' Understandably, people cherish and nurture the traditions which are the bedrock of our organisations. Many are worried that what makes their institution unique will be diminished or eroded by the pace of change. In some cases, that nervousness is translated into resistance.

But then, how can we expect our staff to suddenly wake up fully equipped to deal with this rapidly changing world? We cannot simply demand they adapt. We need to support them. And I think that we have an essential role to play in helping the academic community navigate through this new world.

There will of course, always be the sceptics who are just not interested; who say there's a reason the traditional lecture has survived for so long. They see technology as a threat: and incorporating it into teaching as dumbing down or diminishing the value to students. But actually: teaching students to navigate through vast swathes of information; to assess the veracity of their sources; to communicate their ideas clearly and effectively: what could be more sophisticated?

In reality there is great online teaching and there is lousy online teaching. There is great face-to-face teaching and there is lousy face-to-face teaching. You know what the goal should always be? Great teaching. The factor that dictates whether a student will learn something isn't the mode used to deliver the education – it's the fundamental quality of the education itself. Nothing matters more than that.

I think rather than wasting time trying to convince the King Canutes of the digital age; our efforts are better spent on those currently sitting on the fence, those people who are waiting and seeing. If we can show them the benefits of making the best use of technology to transform the way they teach, then the results will be extremely powerful.

I think we can only do that by being courageous. As leaders, we have to make a conscious decision to stand up to the tyranny of conventional wisdom. If our colleagues see us willing to lead, then they will follow. We can inspire through example. There will be mistakes, of course – wrong turns and changes of direction along the way. But we have to be prepared to take risks. We have to be brave. It's not comfortable or easy to be a pioneer. But it is extremely exciting.

The American naval officer John Richardson once said, 'When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened.' We must be the kind of people who make it happen. Our students are counting on us.

Thank you.

Sir John Cass's Foundation

Established in 1748, and now a major independent educational charity benefiting the whole of London, the Foundation takes its name from its founder, Sir John Cass. Born in 1661, he served as Alderman, Sheriff and MP for the City of London and was knighted in 1712.

Today the Foundation has links in the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of education, supporting its primary and secondary schools in London, as well as the Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design within London Metropolitan University and the Cass Student Halls of Residence in Hackney, which provides good quality, low cost accommodation for students in London and beyond.

It is now over ten years since the Foundation made a multi-million pound grant to City University's Business School, which was subsequently re-named the Cass Business School, and continues to provide on-going support, to this and eight establishments bearing the name of the founder.

A substantial grant was awarded to the University of East London towards a new state-of-the-art teaching and research centre which opened in 2009 and was named the Sir John Cass School of Education and Communities. This is already one of London's foremost centres for teacher training, and importantly in terms of outcomes, many of its alumni are working in local schools.

During the year, the Foundation embarked upon a new area of work; launching a fundraising campaign at the Mansion House in London in September 2014. The purpose of the campaign was to raise funds so that a greater number of individuals and organisations could benefit from assistance. A new website was also launched simultaneously and was designed to demonstrate the breadth and scope of the work of the Foundation, as well as making it easier to apply for support.

In terms of grants awarded, support has been given to the Hampshire Cass Foundation Mountain Centre, which is based in the Brecon Beacons in south Wales. This is a collaborative venture with Hampshire County Council and enables pupils from inner London to visit and participate fully in all the outdoor educational activities at the centre.

Partnerships with the British Academy and Pembroke College, Cambridge have also flourished. The Foundation's grant to the British Academy provides assistance for ground breaking educational research in the areas of educational disadvantage and business education. Support at Pembroke College provides assistance in the form of a Cass Scholarship and enables those from straitened circumstances to undertake their courses in the knowledge that assistance will be provided for the duration of their undergraduate studies at Cambridge.

Additional support has been provided to the London College of Fashion towards the women's prisoner education programme at HMP Send (winner of the Big Society Award 2014) and the creation of a Social Enterprise at HMP Holloway, (Made For Change) which was officially opened by HRH The Countess of Wessex GCVO in June 2014.

The partnership between the Foundation and the Baker Dearing Trust has also been strengthened. The Foundation is keen to support the advancement of technical education and the creation of University Technical Colleges; and lastly support has also been provided to the Share Foundation to augment Government support for Looked After Children; one of the most disadvantaged groups in society, by investing funds for these needy individuals in Junior ISAs.

It is hoped that these funds will be used for educational purposes in the future, thus ending what is often described as "the cycle of underachievement".

For further information please visit: www.sirjohncass.org