ENGAGE 26 : Sir Andrew Cubie
Rethinking Our Purpose

I would like you to imagine that you are beside me as we wait for a lift to join yet another meeting. We wait for long enough for a brief exchange, in which you ask me for my views about the Leadership Foundation in these troubled times. My response is rapid and positive. I consider there are, as never before, opportunities for the Leadership Foundation to support the sector and to be truly ‘of the sector, for the sector’.

As the lift arrives, I prepare to give you the ‘elevator pitch’, which you will find so named in our recently adopted strategy for 2011-2014:

We are part of higher education – helping university people learn more about leadership. We develop capacity for leadership, governance and management, both for individuals and for groups. We do this through innovation, information, intervention and interaction, nationally and internationally. We invest in thinking and research; we identify relevant and innovative practice and disseminate it; we intervene with development programmes, consultancy advice and coaching; and we engage with our stakeholders. We are a membership organisation – a professional leadership club. We provide safe spaces to discuss the big challenges, to generate learning collaboratively. We give leaders, governors and managers the capability and confidence to achieve transformational change in higher education and develop the best university leadership in the world.

The leadership (and governance and management) of higher education has improved substantially over the past seven years, and the Leadership Foundation has undoubtedly been instrumental in contributing to this. Our branding has served its purpose well. Arguably, the Leadership Foundation’s original mission (“...leadership having... the same high esteem as research, teaching and learning...”) has been substantially achieved. Over the next period, we shall reassess the suitability of the Leadership Foundation’s brand statements and positioning, to secure maximum impact in relation to the new challenges the higher education sector faces.

In these concise messages I hope that, when you and I part, you are quite clear as to the goals of the Leadership Foundation for the coming years to 2014. Certainly in my view, and that of the board and the executive team led by Ewart Wooldridge CBE, the need for – and, in consequence, the demand for – the services of the Leadership Foundation has never been greater. It is our task to rise to this challenge, with a membership organisation addressing in the most cost-effective terms the demands of governing bodies, vice-chancellors, senior management teams and so many others in the sector, with both established and changing programmes.

Our planning period will see across the UK a continuing decline in the proportion of public-purse support for all institutions, intensified debate about academic collaboration, as well as back office function, merger and potential failure of institutions. Leadership through such change is fundamental, and it falls to all of us in the Leadership Foundation to help lead our sector leaders through these days, which for some will be abundant in opportunity and yet for others, without support, will herald the end of careers.

In the period to 2014, governors will be challenged as never before. Objective assessment by governors of institutional sustainability and their consequent strategic choices around positioning, pricing and investment will become critical. The sector has long (and rightly) asserted autonomy for individual institutions, but these will be truly testing times for such independence.

Leaders need to respond to such events across institutions. I would hope such threats, as indeed they are, will bring communities of interest closer together. If individual institutions with their varied leadership styles do not so respond, their days will be deservedly dark.

The Leadership Foundation has undertaken, and continues to undertake, a thorough review of its purpose. The elevator pitch is part of that. I do think, as a group, we in the Foundation are now more clear as to our purpose. Whilst it may be glib, I do regard J F Kennedy’s question in 1962 of a floor sweeper as testing today as it was then. For all of us in leadership roles, how would any in our teams, large or small, respond to that simple question: “And what is your job?” The next time you go into a lift with colleagues, try it!