

VOICE OF THE FUTURE 2014

The Boothroyd Room was packed to the hilt with young scientists and engineers for this year's highly successful *Voice of the Future* event again organised by the Society of Biology on behalf of the science and engineering community. It was opened by the Speaker of the House of Commons, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, who praised both the Society for its leadership and the event itself as a real contribution in bringing science and Parliament together.

... "no other event like it on the planet" ...

Andrew Miller MP, Chair of the House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee, said there was "no other event like it on the planet" as proceedings were streamed live on the Parliament.uk website and subsequently broadcast on the BBC Parliament Channel.

Four panels totalling about 100 young researchers from 22 of the UK's most important science



organisations, and aged between 16 and 35, were invited to question key political figures including the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Members of the Science & Technology Select Committee,

the Science Minister and Shadow Science Minister.

The Rt Hon David Willetts MP, Universities and Science Minister, defended the Coalition's record on science funding, science education and

skills shortages in the face of questions from young scientists and engineers.

He was asked by young panel members about why the Government seems to be focused on research projects





discouraging overseas students from studying here.

"We do not have a cap on the numbers of students who can benefit from coming here to study," he said. "We have heightened the criteria – for example they must have a certain standard of English,

... think about the potential implications of their research ...

with direct economic impact. The Minister assured the assembled panel that there was "no policy to move funding away from fundamental and curiosity-driven research".

"The impact agenda is about getting researchers to think about the potential implications of their research, not to get them to study something else," he said.

... often forced to make decisions ...

He was also forced to defend the Coalition's immigration policy when asked if it had damaged science and engineering in the UK by

which ensures classes aren't held back for that reason. The challenge is to communicate around the world that if you come to study here you will get a warm welcome."

Earlier Sir Mark Walport, the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, said the UK



Government has "the best embedded science advice in any government in the world", in response to questions about using evidence in policy-making. But he said that politicians are often forced to make decisions on a time scale that means evidence is incomplete or not available.

The Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP, the Shadow Minister for Universities, Science and Skills, pledged his full support to the idea of funding postgraduate education through Government-backed student loans. "Managers at Barclays and NatWest should not be in charge of who is funded for further study if we want to increase our skills base," he said.

... held back by countries such as Germany ...

Members of the Select Committee – used to sitting round the horseshoe asking the questions rather than at the witness table *answering* them – were asked why the development of GM crops was still being held back despite

overwhelming evidence that they are safe. Committee member and Liberal Democrat MP David Heath said the EU was looking at allowing countries that want to use GM crops to use them, because most of Europe was being held back by countries such as Germany who are "completely unmovable on the issue".



A video of the full session is available on the UK Parliament website and the Society of Biology has created a storify of the tweets.

