The upstream oil & gas industry and the environment in which we operate is changing rapidly, faster than at any other time over the last 50 years. In recent years the success of the US shale gas and oil phenomenon has captured global media attention. And while the benefits which have been realised by US manufacturing and the US economy are substantial, not all consequences have been beneficial. Hydraulic fracturing operations (fracking), an essential component of the path to commercialisation of shale hydrocarbons, have become the pariah of the industry. A combination of well-intentioned community concerns and vested interest group rhetoric; and misrepresentation has significantly constrained the industry in many countries and resulted in total prohibition in others.

The industry response has been belated and generally ineffective; generalised by individual companies trying, understandably, to protect their immediate work programmes and vested interests. This archaic response is unlikely to achieve effective and enduring success, as measured by the expedient approval of Social Licences to Operate. Even in the improbable scenario that short-term project-focused campaigns have even limited success, tomorrow there will be another community concern, fuelled by a media motivated by short term sensationalism, and vested interest groups prepared to prostitute honesty and integrity to achieve self-serving objectives.

While it is true to say that not everyone in the US is a member of the fracking fan club, the fact that the oil and gas industry and its interest groups have, for years, been able to sell the public and policymakers on the benefits of exploration and production has been an embarrassment. Public awareness of the impact that the industry has had on our communities, on the environment, on our quality of life, has been silent. But this is no longer the case. The general public is now well informed of the industrial and environmental impacts of hydrocarbon production and the need for better regulation and management of these activities.

The Society of Petroleum Engineers in the development of its most recent strategic plan has recognised this challenge to the industry and has embarked upon a number of programmes designed to inform the general public and, most importantly, school children, about the facts, the benefits and the risks. The SPE is also maturing its outreach programme but it is a slow process. The PESGB is partnering with several organisations such as the Earth Sciences Teachers Association and UK Onshore Oil and Gas (UKOOA) to help present collaborative and consistent information. More recently, SPE commissioned a message that is heard with open ears.

Perhaps we in the PESGB and North West Europe can learn from the example set by our colleagues in the UK and help bring forward a government and a society that will be more prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. It is evident that there will not be different views nor does it mean that the oil and gas industry will, or should, become the blue-eyed public favourite. Governments are empowered to make decisions which are meant to be in the long term interests of the society and, given an informed public, they will do so.

The long term solution is dependent on the general public, politicians, non-governmental organisations and other vested interest groups having unbiased presentations of the facts and ready access to quality information. There is a collective responsibility of industry, industry professional bodies and governments to develop a long term vision and strategic plan for the future, ensuring the development and management of the nations hydrocarbon resources; offshore and onshore; conventional and unconventional. Fundamental to this plan is an Energy Education programme, which has to be part of every school curriculum.