

'Sharp kids' who can show Sir Philip Green a thing or two

Not even a grilling from the Bhs billionaire is too much for students of the Fashion Retail Academy, writes **Richard Fletcher**

PRESENTING designs to Sir Philip Green, the entrepreneur and owner of Arcadia and Bhs, is a daunting prospect even for the most experienced retail buyer.

But Scott Pearson from Romford, Essex, is holding his own as the billionaire retailer quizzes the 16-year-old on his "design board" – which draws inspiration from the work of the 1960s designer Mary Quant.

"These kids are sharp," said Sir Philip. Stuart Rose, the chief

executive of Marks & Spencer; John Peace, the chief executive of GUS; and Terry Green, the chief executive of clothing at Tesco, are equally impressed.

The retail heavyweights are on a tour of the Fashion Retail Academy, which opened its doors to 200 students for the first time this week.

Tucked behind Oxford Street, the academy does not look like your typical college. Pop music blasts out and an 8ft by 6ft plasma screen and trendy black and white photographs adorn the walls.

The library on the fourth floor has as many copies of *Vogue*, *InStyle*, *Glamour* and *GQ* as it has dictionaries. And with its wooden floor and glass staircase, the reception area would not embarrass a FTSE 100 company.

But it is not just the environment that is different:



Fashion Retail Academy students Scott Pearson and Nicole Sinclair

the academy students, who hope to gain a diploma in fashion retail, will spend almost as much time working on the shop floor as they will in the classroom, with work experience across all areas of retailing: buying, visual merchandising and distribution.

"Exams are important, but practical skill and creativity is equally important," said Mr Rose.

Backed by the retail industry's big hitters – Arcadia, Marks & Spencer, GUS, Tesco and Next – the academy is the first of 12 that the Government hopes will be developed across a variety of sectors.

"My hope is that this will be a flagship for other industries. This is a great opportunity for other industries to follow," said Sir Philip.

"Training people and bringing

through a new generation of people is paramount to the future success of retailing in the UK. We can develop people who love this business and have a passion for it in their blood," he added.

The M&S boss describes the academy as a rare example of co-operation between retailers. "Retail is the biggest industry in the UK bar none. But there is a skills and talent shortage and finding good people is the number-one problem for all of us," he said.

Mr Rose hopes that the academy will help to identify the leaders of tomorrow.

"By the time you are all chief executives I will long be retired," he joked as he welcomed the students to their new home.

The students, it seems, are almost as excited as the

retailers. As the four of them enter the auditorium they are greeted by applause and cheers – anyone would have thought a boy-band had arrived not four fifty-something men in suits. "I'm hoping that this course will teach me about the business side of retail," said Nicole Sinclair, a 19-year-old from Enfield, north London.

The academy plans to draw on the sponsors for expertise and speakers. And both Sir Philip and Mr Rose plan to make regular visits.

"It's a seven-minute walk from my office. I'll be popping in," said the Bhs chief.

Although as he is accosted by students in the basement cafe he discovers that they are as interested in whether Kate Moss really is working on a Top Shop collection, as they are on his hints on how to make it in retail.