

Transport technology is about life-long learning

While there's no denying it's excellent news that Ford has granted 12 UK universities 100 engineering student scholarships, worth a grand total of £1 million this year, it can only be a favoured few knocking back the well earned champagne.

Ford is, of course, far from alone. At a more vocational level, engineering apprentices, too, are on the rise – with Scania and Smith Electric Vehicles among those currently in the limelight (page 40) for their growing programmes dedicated to teaching transport technicians their trade. And there are plenty more such schemes – albeit mostly among the OEMs and major suppliers – that we should be celebrating.

But the plain fact is, there aren't enough – and there's not likely to be for the foreseeable future. Particularly in these times of austerity, it's difficult for smaller companies supplying equipment and/or services to the commercial transport sector to afford what they may regard (arguably shortsightedly) as little more than altruism. Against that, however, few of us – whether apprentice or time-served engineer – can claim there's no need for any kind of professional development.

That point is well illustrated by the sheer spread of developments currently being unveiled, many of which are likely to impact either fleet managers, specifying and running vehicles, or workshop technicians maintaining them. In the last few weeks alone, for example, BAE Systems has signed a deal with Caterpillar to build an energy-efficient parallel hybrid propulsion system for heavy-duty trucks – and another with Qinetiq to deliver hybrid electric drives for the US Army's new ground combat vehicle programme. Both are bound to be game changers, at least demanding the learning curves witnessed in the bus world since the adoption of hybrid vehicles.

Meanwhile, VCA (the Vehicle Certification Agency) has given its seal of approval to SDC Trailers' and Don-Bur's longer semi trailers – opening the door for these and similar beasts, with their novel steering systems, to get on roads and into workshops. SDC says it has orders for 70 and, with Wincanton as its prototype client, Don-Bur won't be letting that claim go unchallenged.

Then, again, in the trucking world, DAF's new air-suspended, single reduction, double-drive bogie for heavy-duty applications is the kind of development likely to trigger more widespread developments elsewhere. At a stonking 375kg lighter than the firm's previous hub reduction tandem, it can't be ignored. What's more, those who assumed that Euro 6 engines trucks wouldn't be gracing real roads for at least another few months, if not years, need to think again. The first Mercedes-Benz Actros tractor unit with a BlueTec 6 ultra-low emissions engine has already been delivered to Norbert Dentressangle. Note also: this operator is running three diesel-electric hybrids as well – two 19-tonne Renaults and a 12-tonne Mercedes.

So it goes on – making the point eloquently that transport engineering is anything but standing still, leading to the inescapable conclusion that those who fail to invest in their training and education, at whatever level, will most certainly be left behind.

Next month sees the return of the industry's greatest UK learning event, the CV Show 2012, from 24–26 April at the NEC. Don't miss out: invest some time in your future. See you there.



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Published by: The Society of Operations Engineers

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The Society of Operations Engineers is a licensed member of the Engineering Council

Registered in England:

Company No. 3667147

Registered Charity: No. 1081753

A Company Limited by Guarantee

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Publisher: Peter Knutton

Transport Engineer is the official journal of IRTE.

Produced on behalf of IRTE and The

Society of Operations Engineers by

Findlay Media Ltd, Hawley Mill, Hawley

Road, Dartford, Kent DA2 7TJ

Tel: 01322 221144

Fax: 01322 221188

www.transportengineer.org.uk

Transport Engineer is distributed free of charge to SOE members, dependent on membership sector. For non-members, the annual subscription rate (12 issues) is £71 UK and EU, or £73 airmail outside EU. For other SOE members, the discounted rate is £28.

Printed by: Holbrooks Printers Ltd,

Portsmouth ISSN: 0020-3122

Views expressed in Transport Engineer are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Society of Operations Engineers or of Findlay Media Ltd.

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