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IRTE
engineering success

Funding for engineering, or failure to invest?

Don't breathe a sigh of relief just yet. Last month, the Coalition stated its intention to provide £49m of funding to improve the development of engineering skills. Its announcement was timed to coincide with Tomorrow's Engineers Week – the campaign aimed at promoting careers in engineering to young people and women.

So far, so good. The funding follows November's publication of the Perkins Review of Engineering Skills. In his report, professor John Perkins CBE FREng, chief scientific adviser to BIS (the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills), sets out the skills shortage issues as he sees them, and presents a list of calls to action, aimed not only at government but also industry, education and the engineering institutions.

Business secretary Vince Cable said government will make up to £30m available for employers to inspire future engineering talent. He also said that £18m has been earmarked for an elite training facility at the Manufacturing Technology Centre, in Coventry. And he pointed to £250,000 of seed funding for the employer-backed Tomorrow's Engineers scheme, to accelerate its rollout.

But while this is good news for engineering, the astute among you will have noticed no specific mention of transport engineering. And it's a similar story with the government's £500 million funding for ultra-low emission vehicles – which commits only £6.5m to commercial vehicles. That didn't pass unnoticed by the Freight Transport Association (FTA), which went on record, warning the Coalition that our industry needs support way beyond that already offered by the Technology Strategy Board, if it is to invest further and faster in low-carbon fuels and technologies.

These failures of detail matter. Transport, as much as any other sector, needs to encourage new engineering talent. We also need to enable the existing pool of thinly spread engineers and technicians to tackle the challenges involved in specifying and running – as well as developing – new generations of affordable transport that reduce our dependence on diesel. And that means more specialist engineering training on top, not instead, of the current curriculum.

For example, in the short- to mid-term, the industry needs more engineers able to specify both alternative and dual-fuel vehicles, taking into account everything from whole-life costs to refuelling, maintenance and logistics implications (page 10). Similarly, we want people with aerodynamic skills, able to tell the difference between good interventions and equipment that just looks green.

Sceptics aside, most of us accept that kit such as cab-top deflectors and Airtabs reduce drag and hence fuel. But how many know when they're worth it? Too few: otherwise we wouldn't see so many poorly adjusted cab deflectors. Or more would go for Hatcher's Active Freddie, which adjusts itself to match trailer height, while also sensing side winds and retracting the spoiler, if yaw exceeds eight degrees (page 16). It's a similar story with Airtabs, claimed to save 2–3% on fuel by creating vortices that bridge the gap between tractor and semi-trailer, while also forcing air to fill the partial vacuum at the trailer rear. They only work that well if you get them right. And what about suppliers such as Aerodyne, which also offer air kit for 3–5 tonne panel vans and Lutons?

Like it or not, transport engineering is increasingly multi-disciplinary and we need help.

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