

## OPINION:

# Steep learning curve

PRESSURE from Government in its strive to modernise and redefine ways our young people are taught may be exciting and crucial routes to improving achievement, but has the process really been thought through regarding the demands the new diplomas put on business?

Diplomas offer a very interesting route to learning. For the first time there is a definite link between the academic and the vocational teaching elements, apart from the apprenticeship route.

Business has been crying out for better literacy, better numeracy and better 'soft' skills – attitude, timekeeping and communication.

With diplomas we have a process that sets out to link business with school and college as an integral part of the process. It also leads to direct work experience for students, which is an essential element in the learning process, providing a 'glue' to knowledge retention and as an inspiration to future career choice.

While attending the third annual conference on diplomas in September, I was sadly and inevitably struck by the lack of businesses in attendance. Hardly surprising – business does not yet know what is going to hit it in terms of demands from teaching establishments.

The diplomas set out to provide upwards of 100 guided learning hours per student, some as much as – or more than – 160 hours.

## **Federation of Small Businesses regional chairman ROGER HOUSE says the demands new diplomas will place on firms must be taken into account**

Each student will be asked to focus on the business sector the diploma is set in, for example creative and media, together with the functional skills; English, maths and ICT. Whereas development has been started with the Sector Skills Councils, in my experience little is known of them or seen of them in day-to-day life.

As small-business people, we are working closely with schools, building up a business engagement process appropriate to the needs of both educators and employers – but driven by employers.

As most of the economy is made up of micro or small businesses, this army of entrepreneurs could offer young people a dynamic insight into enterprise and commerce. It is important that we engage with them effectively. This requires much improved communication from not just the education authority but the schools and education practitioners within them.

The key challenge of the work placement elements of the diploma lie in making the

interaction between business and young people rich in content for students and easily managed and absorbed into the working day for business.

These are interesting times, but the introduction of diplomas won't automatically change perceptions or alter employers' approach to recruitment. We need to work together to communicate at every opportunity the value of diplomas, apprenticeships and work experience placements to business. The sign of success will be employers signing up to participate year after year.

We are playing our part through our community interest company, Education for Enterprise, in forging new and innovative links between education and industry. We benefit from the fact that as a senior part of the Federation of Small Businesses lobbying team, we move seamlessly from year seven in a local school to directors of Sector Skills Councils and indeed the education minister's office itself.

The message we take to Government is, however, a

double-edged one. Yes, we think this is in principal a good idea, but has anyone stopped to really work out the number of hours of business commitment required across all the diploma subjects to make this an effective proposition? Furthermore, out of the whole process, what is the only part that is not funded? Business engagement.

With that in mind, we have set out to make positive contributions from business. We have been building up a fast-growing group of small-business ambassadors, are working with one of the creative and media diploma groups as business advisors, and – late-breaking news – we will soon be opening a commercial office operating from a local school.

Binding this into the curriculum, we will be able to bring business and students together across a long-term work-experience programme which we are confident will benefit all.

For more information, visit [www.smallbusinessambassadors.co.uk](http://www.smallbusinessambassadors.co.uk) or email [info@small-businessambassadors.co.uk](mailto:info@small-businessambassadors.co.uk).

