



BUSINESSSENSE

Helping to bridge the skills gap

'Roving reporter' Tim Kelly visits the Regional Automotive Technology Hub at Blackburn College.

Much has been said about the state of the motor industry, whether it be in body repair or the mechanical sector. An ageing demographic, the current skills shortage, issues with recruiting qualified staff, the advancement of vehicle technologies, the need to be able to effect safe repairs, and the difficulty of engaging people to make them want to work in our bodyshops – these are just some of the problems our industry faces.

The Institute of the Motor Industry expects a requirement for 90,000 technicians by 2030, and anticipates a 35,700 shortfall.

I act as a STEM ambassador, part of which involves going into schools and talking to pupils about our industry and the benefits of focusing on science, technology, engineering and maths. But where do these youngsters go when they have an interest? And is it just teenagers we want to attract? Are further education facilities investing in the needs of the future of the repair industry to train future technicians?

All these questions are being answered by, among others, Blackburn College which is the driving force behind a new £1.3m motor vehicle project that aims to bridge the skills gap. To find out more, I spoke with

long-time friend and head of motor vehicle at Blackburn College, Gerard "Ged" Linnane (*pictured below*).

Can you tell me a little about the history of the college's motor department and also its future?

Blackburn College has catered for the adult training needs of local and not-so-local residents for more than 60 years. The college continually improves and seeks investment for future resources, and is the leading Lancashire Automotive Skills Accelerator Project, funded by the Department for Education as part of the Skills Accelerator Strategic Development Fund.

The project, which was officially launched at Blackburn College in November 2021, will create low-carbon skills centres across Lancashire, providing significant investment in cutting-edge technologies and upskilling teachers

to ensure that courses meet the needs of employers and the industry. These skills centres – at Blackburn College, Blackpool and the Fylde College, Lancaster and Morecambe College, Myerscough College, and Nelson and Colne College Group – will support the government's commitment to withdrawing the sale of new petrol or





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diesel cars in 2030 as part of the UK's net zero targets. The skills centres will work with dealerships and independent garages to train the employees of the future in the safe repair and maintenance of electric and hybrid vehicles, along with hydrogen.

Also, a Lancashire independent garage network will be established to support motor vehicle businesses with skills, advice and guidance on how to meet the future industry demands for electric, hybrid and hydrogen vehicles and to adapt their businesses for growth.

Does the college experience any issues with attracting students to these courses?

Not during the 11 years I have worked here, in fact the number of students per year has increased. When I started, there was four groups at level one, that has now risen to six. Part of the reason for that is local demographics. There are a large number of people in the area and consequentially there are lots of garages to serve them; we are attracting family members of the owners as the businesses get passed on.

What issues do you experience in terms of retention?

We normally attain around 90% retention across courses; students can change course within the first 42 days, so we also get a number of students moving across to our courses.

The facilities here are very impressive. Is there other equipment the college is investing in?

We have recently received state-of-the-art ADAS recalibration systems along with four-wheel alignment. We are also allowing local businesses to access these resources and the MOT bay.

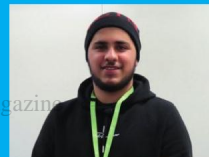


To find out more, scan the QR code or visit:

- <https://youtu.be/qTYFRUzDko0&t=4s>
- <https://www.blackburn.ac.uk/about-us/welcome/world-class-campus/regional-automotive-technology-hub-rath/>

STUDENT VIEW

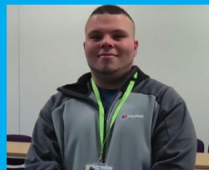
Tim Kelly spoke to two Blackburn College students who, during his visit, sat and passed exams in the section they were studying. He asked them how they got into the trade and what the future holds, and was struck by the enthusiasm and positivity at the college. He said: "The industry has a strong and promising future as long as we engage with the next generations and, as Blackburn College has done, invest heavily in their future by looking at what training needs they have to help us future consumers get our vehicles repaired."



Ibrahim Khan | 19
Studying Level 3

I did work experience when I was 15 at school, really liked it and then helped my dad when he was working on his cars and I learned how to service them. I am passionate about cars, especially in modifying them, and wanted to learn more.

Having knowledge of existing vehicles that are on the road that will still need maintaining in the future. The move to EV, autonomous and hydrogen is clearly what lies ahead and I need to be able to work on them safely. I want to continue learning, with a focus on the future tuning and performance industry, and my aim is to have my own garage.



Jacob Elliot | 27
Studying Level 3

I have always loved cars, I have a passion for classic BMWs. I did work experience in a garage at 13 and I helped my dad service his car in my teens.

I'm here because I want to learn about both older and newer vehicles so I can be able to work on them in the future. I would like to get experience over a range of areas working in dealerships and independent garages. Once I have the experience and knowledge, I would like my own garage.