

# Building a South West fit for new generation

For South West school leavers and graduates, the jobs market for the class of 2017 is likely to be more challenging than they could possibly have imagined.

Graduate employment slumped in the months preceding June's Brexit vote and if Article 50 is triggered next March as planned, it is reasonable to assume that business confidence, investment and hiring could all take another hit.

In a stark warning from youth charity the YMCA, UK young people recently highlighted their two top concerns as lack of employment opportunities and a failure to succeed in the education system. A recent survey shows over 90% believe business is the way to solve problems like unemployment.

Our region has long suffered from the so-called "brain drain" with two-thirds of graduates leaving Cornwall upon completion of their studies. With additional uncertainty there is a real risk that even more young people may be driven to seek work outside of the region – a huge loss to the South West economy and, indeed, a great shame for those young people who would rather stay.

Attracting and, crucially, retaining talent is one of the key challenges our region faces. Brexit heightens this. At



BY SARAH HEALD, director of corporate affairs at Pennon

Pennon we employ more than 4,800 people through South West Water, Bournemouth Water and Viridor and, like all other businesses large and small, a key part of ensuring a sustainable future is being able to pass vital expertise and skills from one generation to the next. It is therefore vital our region has a positive forward-looking agenda; an agenda which fosters growth, investment and opportunities for young people across a range of business sectors.

At next week's South West Growth Summit, hosted by Pennon at the University of Exeter, in partnership with the *Western Morning News*, the retention of skills will be one of a number of key topics for debate. The event itself is designed to build on the excellent work already being undertaken by our region's Local Enterprise Partnerships, bringing together the region's business, political and academic community and giving the region a stronger collective vision and voice for the years ahead.

As the Government looks to



Students celebrate completing their studies. But the South West loses many of its graduates to other parts of Britain

## Attracting and, crucially, retaining talent is one of the key challenges

devolve funding and powers away from Whitehall, other regions, notably Manchester and Birmingham, have already succeeded in pushing an agenda with government ministers through local leadership. Universities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, businesses and the media in these

regions have come together to urge central government to recognise their strengths and act as a champion to attract investment both domestically and from abroad.

The South West must not be left behind. We must follow suit and create a catalyst for growth if we are to thrive in a post-Brexit world and ensure the region is a choice and not a compromise for its young people.

The historic under-investment in the South West must not be allowed to continue. We must build on our attributes – our world-class universities in

Exeter, Plymouth and Falmouth; top private employers including Pennon among others; steadily improving infrastructure and connectivity, and a culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism.

There is a real need to increase employee skills and the quality of our technical qualifications. Digital is a prime example – today's young people are digital natives. Technology has not only shaped the way they live and work, but also created a whole new set of beliefs, fears and aspirations. The World Economic Forum has cited the fact that 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that don't yet exist. We need to prepare people for this future. We need to invest more in digital infrastructure, not to mention transport infra-

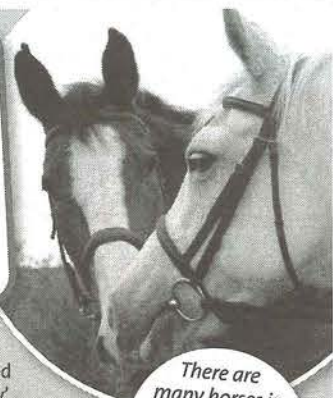
structure including road and rail links that connect our towns and communities.

If we do all of this, we will begin to reverse the brain drain of highly qualified men and women who will drive forward our regional economy. Not only that – we will begin to attract more, larger employers to the region, with a knock-on impact on the supply chain that sustains many small businesses. Keeping our home-grown talent pool will make us more attractive as a region to businesses of all sizes. Evidence shows that creating clusters of excellence (a first-class workforce pushing new ideas and innovations) will increase productivity and create more economic value in our region.

Join us. Back the South West and help us secure a better future for the class of 2017. #backthesouthwest

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