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An evaluation of how main contractors are contributing to closing the skills gap in Wales' construction industry.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

This research explores the key challenges to main contractors in terms of skills and how they respond to these needs. This study will focus on the 'Construction Management' level positions and will ultimately identify how organisations can positively influence the development of skills in Wales' Construction Industry.

Objectives

- Explore the challenges of main contractors in relation to professional skills;
- Identify current and future recruitment requirements/expectations of main contractors and if these are being satisfied by current education provision;
- Define how main contractors are currently supporting the development of professional skills to minimise the existence of a skills gap and satisfy the requirements/ expectations.

Research Methodology

The research comprised both **secondary** and **primary** data. The literature review referenced a series of articles, press releases and reports related to the dissertation title and provided a good background to the topic area – highlighting evident skills gaps and barriers faced by the construction industry in terms of recruitment.

The original proposal was to refine the data through 2 primary research methods. A survey, which comprised multiple choice and free text options, was distributed to over 20 senior managers within Wales' top main contractors. 10 responses were returned and evaluated. Whilst interviews were planned, unfortunately limitations imposed due to Coronavirus meant these did not take place. Therefore, the conclusions and recommendations have been based on secondary research and survey alone.

The topic is relatively narrow due to limited resources and time restrictions. This area of study is vast and future research should include interviews/surveys with educational establishments and industry bodies i.e. CITB, to establish their perceptions of how the industry is being promoted.

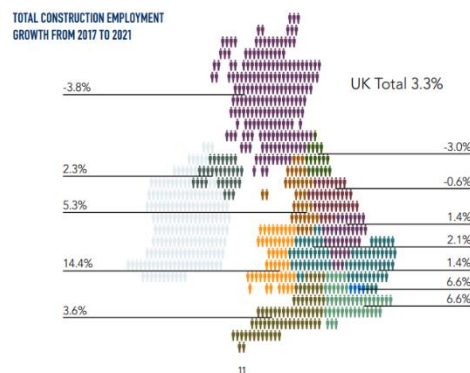
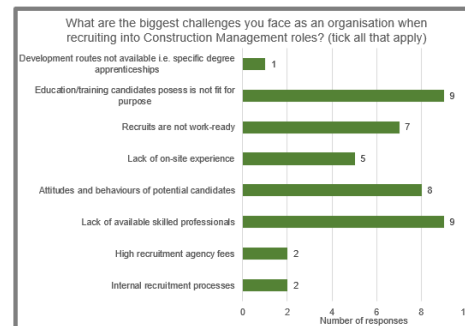


Figure 3 Total Construction Employment Growth from 2017-2021 (CITB, 2018)

Forecasts of industry growth and further employment opportunities (as indicated in Fig 3) are encouraging. To achieve these forecasts and targets the significant skills shortages in the sector need to be addressed. In contrast to the plethora of opportunities, industry facts and figures highlight the distinct lack of qualified skilled workers in the country able to deliver these schemes.

'Further and faster: Closing the construction skills gap'
'There is little doubt that the UK's skills base needs strengthening. Skills gaps in key sectors such as construction are well-documented and getting worse across the country. Challenges including uncertainty around access to skilled labour from the EU following Brexit, efforts to rebalance the economy away from the overheated southeast and to use infrastructure as a way of spreading economic growth, and the need to respond to increasing digitisation and automation, call for a strong, integrated response at all levels.'
(Balfour Beatty plc, 2019)

Figure 10 A graph to show the biggest challenges faced when recruiting into Construction Management roles.



Figures 10 & 14 represent primary research responses from key contractors regarding barriers to pursuing a career in the construction sector and also the challenges faced when recruiting. The major issues being lack of skilled professionals available and also the proposition that education and training is not fit for purpose. It is encouraging that all respondents indicated that they would seek a better relationship with FE/HE to support the development of curriculum – and also that they believe it is their responsibility to contribute in some way to developing entry level candidates for the construction industry (Fig 15 below).



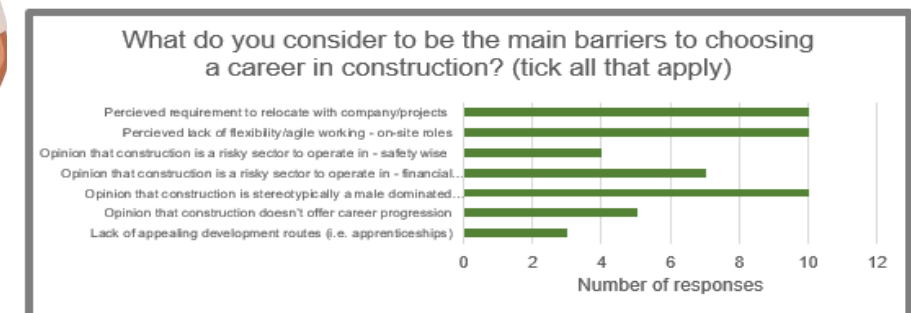
Does your company believe it has an obligation to contribute to hiring, training and developing entry level candidates to ensure the industry skills shortage doesn't increase in Wales?



Figure 15 A pie chart to represent responses from Main Contractors regarding their obligation to contribute to narrowing the skills gap in the construction sector.

The patterns and themes emerging from the primary research supported the research within the literature review. There was a clear indication that there are barriers to selecting construction as a career hence a shortage of skilled professionals. With increasing demands and opportunities in construction teamed with an aging workforce, it is necessary to invest in future talent to ensure skills from existing workers are transferred and individuals are arming themselves with the necessary experience to adopt new technologies and techniques now widely used. Respondents also indicated that a closer relationship with educational establishments is necessary to influence curriculum and guarantee access to talent. It is essential that industry contributes to the content, format and delivery pathways of construction training to guarantee relevance and application to modern day practices.

Figure 14 A graph to highlight barriers to construction as a career.



In conclusion, the researcher identified three key themes which form the basis of the recommendations. These support the overall research aim to contribute positively to the development of skills in the Wales' construction industry.

Theme A – Construction Industry Profile

The research reinforced the existence of numerous barriers to entry into construction as a career including the industry profile which undoubtedly impacts the availability of skilled workers. More could be done to highlight the plethora of appealing opportunities and high earning potential of certain roles – particularly in Construction Management i.e. Design, Surveying and Project Management.

Theme B – Education

The research highlighted there is scope for construction companies to engage more closely with educational providers for a variety of benefits to ultimately reduce the skills gaps that exists within this sector.

Theme C – Recruitment

The research highlighted the heavy costs associated with current recruitment processes due to there being limited availability of skilled professionals. By exploring alternative recruitment methods and working closely with various organisations and educational institutions to offer in work progression, traineeships and apprenticeships, the sector will benefit from greater access to resources and the diminishing power of recruitment agencies.

This research concludes that there is a plethora of opportunities that exist within Wales and it is essential that industry and education collaborate to ensure curriculum is fit for purpose and students are work ready. Recommendations have been made in three key areas – Construction Industry Profile, Education and Recruitment. Wales stands a lot to gain through greater investment in marketing the profile of Construction as an exciting career opportunity and through better industry/education collaboration. It will benefit main contractors to contribute to generating wider interest to work in the sector and work closer with training providers - ultimately narrowing the skills gap.