

A photograph of a construction worker wearing a white hard hat, a white surgical mask, and a bright orange high-visibility jacket. He is holding a rolled-up set of blueprints. The background shows a blurred steel structure of a building under construction.

LEARNING TO EARNING:

Increasing the number of
FE learners who enter the
construction industry

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Foreword



The Coronavirus pandemic has had many impacts on the construction industry, not least because it has made it harder for employers to take on new apprentices. Learners unable to find an apprenticeship are likely to start construction-related courses in Further Education (FE) this year. Therefore, the imperative is to ensure more of those talented young people in FE join our sector as we begin the recovery from the economic effects of the pandemic.

To enable this, the FE route into both apprenticeships and construction jobs needs to work much better than now. Currently, only one in four (24%) of these learners gain employment in construction within six months of finishing their course, with a further one in six (16%) starting an apprenticeship in the industry.¹ With around 100,000 construction learners in FE at any time, the three out of every five learners not working in the industry shortly after completing their training represents a vast untapped potential.

Beyond the sheer number of people who we need to encourage to join construction, there is a further challenge. Construction employers find that many young recruits are poorly prepared for work and do not have appropriate work-readiness skills.² This raises important questions about what FE colleges and employers can do to address this challenge and how CITB can support this.

In response, CITB has committed in its 2021-25 Strategic Plan to work with Government, industry and training providers to break down the barriers that prevent young people entering the construction industry from FE.

“To support Britain’s economy and to develop our own talent, it’s critical that we make it easier for young people to go from Further Education into a career in the construction industry.”

We want to work with FE to create pathways from it into construction to meet the skills needs of employers. Success will depend on how employers and FE work together to design more effective routes from colleges into industry to meet the sector’s rapidly changing skills needs. It will also be vital for employers to provide opportunities for learners to get practical experience of the industry outside of apprenticeships.

In this summary paper, we present new evidence on the motivations of different types of learners on construction courses and the challenges they face that will inform this work. Critically, this research shows an equal split between those learners who are focused (25%) or engaged (20%) in their course, as opposed to those who are ambivalent (45%).

Some of the key opportunities for learners that could help engagement and support their transition into industry include: support for essential skills such as maths and English; more practical experience through industry placements; increased availability of apprenticeships and a quicker transfer from FE courses into construction; with the correct support for young people, this could offer the excitement of being placed in new careers on large construction projects with good pay and rewards. Many of these learners also shared their belief that the economic impact of Coronavirus will lead to fewer apprenticeship and work placement opportunities, making it difficult for them to secure a job in the industry.

These findings have been drawn from in-depth interviews and focus groups with learners, employers and training providers.

Steve Radley
Director of Strategy and Policy at CITB

¹ CITB, Destinations of Construction Learners in Further Education, June 2017

² CITB, Achievers and Leavers, 2018; Young people’s work readiness and the construction industry, 2018

To better understand the barriers to FE learners joining the construction industry and to outline potential solutions.

Policy overview

CITB interventions to support more FE learners to enter construction.

CITB is undertaking a range of actions to ensure employers can recruit more talented young people from FE in recovery from the pandemic.

We are working with FE to create a new employer-backed pathway from colleges into construction to support these learners. We are doing this in partnership with Government, the Association of Colleges (AoC), the British Association of Construction Heads (BACH) and Construction Leadership Council (CLC).

This pathway will be made up of the first sector-based Traineeship which will give learners all the tools they need to go to the next step towards a construction career. They will learn essential maths and English skills, occupational skills, and be given a 10-week industry work-placement.

Following their Traineeship learners will move into a new fast-track construction apprenticeship that, again for the first time, recognises this prior learning. We anticipate that over 2,000 learners will progress more quickly into construction apprenticeships and jobs in 2021 through this route.

CITB will support the Government's upcoming FE White Paper to radically reform the focus and relevance of courses for both learners and employers. An important part of this will be a bigger role for colleges in ensuring there are better links between FE and construction employers so that training truly meets their needs.

The pathway we are helping to develop isn't just about providing a solution to a current problem. We want to build on this to create a much closer working relationship between employers and FE in the future. Only one in five (22%) employers engage with colleges to support their recruitment needs, with one in four (26%) to support their training needs. Further, half of the employers who do engage with colleges don't collaborate on course content.³

CITB is also working with employers to increase the number of short-term work experience opportunities and to provide a way to match them with interested individuals. Through this mechanism, we expect that 28,000 'taster' experiences will be delivered across GB by 2025.

We will also expand our 'hub' model to provide 19,000 onsite experiences on large construction sites so that 13,300 more people gain the employability skills needed to start an apprenticeship or job in the sector by 2025. This model works by joining together key clients on a project or geographical basis, engaging with charities and other partners involved in employment and working together to offer work experiences of two to three weeks. This approach will complement our work to improve the number of learners successfully entering the industry through the FE route.

These interventions will be both a solution to the immediate recruitment challenge in recovery from the pandemic, but also part of a long-term reinvention of how FE works with employers to meet their skills needs. Further findings on the types of learners on construction-related courses in FE and the barriers they face are detailed within the report.

Research methodology

The research was carried out from February to June 2020 and included:

- Desk research
- In-depth interviews with 20 FE providers and 20 employers
- Interviews with 11 stakeholders including those at CITB, employer federations and colleges
- Eight focus groups with a total of 58 learners from across England, Scotland and Wales studying Level 1 and 2 construction-related courses.

This report sets out the findings from research, commissioned by CITB and conducted by Pye Tait Consulting, to explore the participation and progression of construction learners aged 16-18 from FE courses and the variety of influencing factors that shape the pathways they take.

The research took place during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Britain, which meant that in addition to its original aims it was also able to focus on ways in which Covid-19 has impacted on employers, FE providers and learners.

A core element of the research was to consider the degree to which different groups of learners can be expected to progress into the construction workforce. This will enable us to better target interventions to support young people to move from FE into industry.



The research identified five types of learners on construction courses

Ambivalent Learners (45%) Those who lack direction, don't know what to do, may have followed friends onto courses. This group might lack understanding about what employment in the industry involves, but do want a hands-on job. They may lack motivation, but can become more engaged when taken onsite.

Focused Learners (25%) Often have a family background or other connections to the construction industry. They know what path they want to take, although sometimes haven't passed maths or English GCSEs. They can sometimes become frustrated at the slow pace of learning.

Engaged Learners (20%) Have an interest in the subject they are studying, perhaps as a result of school or hobbies. They want to be away from a school-type learning environment and value practical learning, but don't have industry links.

SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)

Learners (6%) Tend to lack the life and practical skills to enter employment and frequently need more time and supervision to complete tasks.

Disappointed Learners (4%) May have wanted to take an alternative pathway but for a variety of reasons have been unable to do so. These learners value practical work, being part of a team, and want to have structure and direction.

Many of the issues faced by these groups can be addressed by the interventions outlined in the introduction. For example, for Focused Learners who want a faster pace of learning, the ability to move from FE onto a fast-track apprenticeship would be attractive. In addition, for the largest group, Ambivalent Learners, the employability training and eight-week placement as part of the new Traineeship could make a difference in improving their understanding of what the sector is really like.



Varied perceptions of full-time FE courses and apprenticeships

There is a clear mismatch between learners' and employers' perceptions of the value of FE courses.

Learners were largely positive about the content and pace of FE construction courses. Many learners at the start of their courses simply saw it as a natural progression from school, without having a long-term outlook of what it might lead to. While some learners had not considered an apprenticeship prior to joining FE, once they started their course many thought it was a good preparation for one, which they saw as the best route to a career in the trades.

“I think the learning we do in college gives us an overview of the job and ‘the formal/proper way’ of doing it rather than what is actually done onsite.”

Learner

Employers perspective

Employers, in contrast, viewed full-time courses as inadequate for industry needs. This was mainly based upon a lack of real onsite experience, but also because the courses were insufficiently challenging for some. They saw the courses as a direct alternative to an apprenticeship rather than leading towards one. Again, the Traineeship model would help bridge the gap between learners' needs and employers' expectations.

On a more positive note, some employers believe that FE tutors' knowledge of their learners and which of them are most able to progress into work is a largely underutilised recruitment resource. They are aware of the students which are likely to do well in the industry and effectively recommend those ones for an apprenticeship. CITB, working with AoC and BACH, will seek to tap into this in the identification of learners to undertake the new Traineeship.

One SME said it had been key to their business to have a relationship with their local college tutor. In terms of more general development, some employers also recognise the wider role of colleges to develop young people, particularly their communication and soft skills.

Providers perspective

Providers are keen to increase awareness of the broader benefits of FE such as developing self-confidence and learning about strengths, weaknesses and making decisions about their future goals.

Characteristics of stayers:

Many employers said a family background in construction would give them a greater understanding of the industry and help them stay. In contrast, however, some said that this might be more to do with recruiting practices which still sees many joining the industry through a family member.

Other factors thought to be important in staying in the industry was a strong work ethic, passion for their trade and flexibility in terms of the work they were willing to do.

Providers thought a supportive parent or carer would help someone stay in the sector, as well as natural talent and an awareness of future earning potential.



“What I say to all my apprentices is that they will learn more with me in a day than they will in a year in college. It is a day of graft and often they are just not used to it. In this way, I think they can often be misled by colleges.”

Employer

Barriers to progression from FE to construction

Learners believed there were a wide range of barriers to progressing into the industry. These included the pay provided by an apprenticeship, which is less than employment in other sectors, such as retail, at least in the short-term. In addition, the volume of apprenticeships available was insufficient for everyone on an FE course to get one, with few having a clear plan B to gain entry to the industry.

Those without a link to an employer saw recruitment practices which favoured family members as a significant barrier, which remains the primary recruitment method for many employers. Their perception was that those with industry connections were favoured ahead of them, even if their own skills or attitude were superior.

The English and maths GCSE resit requirement was a huge source of frustration for many learners in the study. They believe these qualifications are out of their reach and as such their progression into the industry through an apprenticeship is blocked.

For employers, they have a different view of the barriers to entry, mostly centred around the attitude of the young person, and their willingness to adapt to the site environment.

For example, a lack of willingness to work long hours in bad weather was seen as a barrier. This is linked to a general lack of onsite experience prior to joining the industry. They share the view of learners that apprentices' or new entrants' pay rates can be demotivating.

Employers felt that perceptions of the industry could be a barrier, in two ways. First, in terms of a lack of diversity within the sector which could perpetuate the view that jobs aren't available to people of all backgrounds; second, because of the diminished standing of specialist trades from previous generations.

Employers considered that there were issues with line managers expecting new entrants to be the 'finished product'. In a related point, employers acknowledged that there was often a lack of structured support to help a young person develop their skills and experience.

During the current Coronavirus pandemic, some of these barriers have been exacerbated, access to apprenticeships in particular. Meanwhile, new barriers have emerged, such as the ability to deliver face-to-face courses to the same number of students within social distancing guidelines. On the plus side, online teaching methods have been embraced by the majority of students, with better-than-expected levels of engagement.



Summary

This report suggests that there are significant challenges in meeting the needs and expectations of both employers and learners who are looking to start careers in construction.

Employers think that FE courses are the equivalent to an apprenticeship, whereas learners believe they are a route to one.

Apprenticeships are in increasingly short supply in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic. This will put pressure on the FE system to support the needs of learners and deliver them to employers in need of their skills. Currently, only two out of every five FE learners join the construction industry shortly after completing their courses, which suggests the scale of the task at hand.

In addition, recruitment practices within large parts of the sector remain informal and linked to families and friends rather than forms and fairness. This means that recruiting the most talented people from diverse backgrounds will be hindered until modern recruitment techniques are adopted.

It is clear that ensuring more young talent is able to join construction is a complex, longstanding problem, made more acute by Coronavirus, and requires a multi-faceted solution.

In our introduction, we outline a number of interventions CITB is working with industry, government and learning providers to transform the route from FE to employment. These include the new construction traineeships, accelerated apprenticeships, onsite hubs providing 'taster' experiences and work-readiness training, and the general availability of work opportunities through the Construction Talent Retention Scheme.

As we make our transition out of the EU, the focus on developing our own talent must be laser-like. We know we have the young people who want to join our sector, the colleges to teach them, and the employers who need their skills. It will only be through working in collaboration that we will break down these barriers and help the next generation move seamlessly from learning to earning.

December 2020

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The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) supports the skills needs of British construction. It attracts talent to the construction sector so employers have an adequate recruitment pool, and encourages employers of all sizes to access the skills training necessary to grow their businesses.