Understanding Further Education in Construction

Background

This Understanding Further Education (FE) in Construction research has been undertaken to provide CITB with robust evidence on the role of FE and to define what it provides for the construction industry now and in the future. The study spans England, Scotland, and Wales.

The specific objectives of the research were to;

- Outline the social, political, and economic context impacting FE, and identify the related challenges and opportunities.
- Ascertain what construction FE courses provide for the industry in respect of new entrants versus its role in upskilling/reskilling existing members of the construction workforce and wider labour market.
- Gain a better understanding of the destinations of learners, including an indication of the volumes entering employment in construction and what the enablers and inhibitors are.
- Explore what is successful about the offer for FE construction and what is unsuccessful and needs improvement.
- Ascertain if construction is a priority area and financially viable for FE institutions.
- Ascertain if training providers and employers believe there are gaps are in provision, and why.
- Explore how construction FE is approached in other countries, particularly if there are exemplars in respect of successful pathways from FE at Level 2 and below into construction employment and if they could be adopted in the UK.
- Explore if other sectors are facing similar issues to construction FE with supply and demand and assess what can be learnt from these sectors with the potential to adopt in construction.

Research Methodology

- This research draws on primary evidence from 55 depth interviews and two roundtable discussions with;
    - Educational policy experts/commentators
    - Heads of Construction in FE colleges
    - Construction course tutors in FE colleges
    - Private training providers offering construction
    - Construction sector employers
    - Heads of other sectors
    - Two round table discussions (UK-wide and Wales) with Heads of construction and construction tutors from the FE sector.
- This primary research was supplemented by desk-based research into the background context, learner destination data and assessment of the situation in a selected number of other countries.

Key Findings

- Plans for major reforms to qualifications has posed massive uncertainty for the FE sector, particularly so in Scotland where funding is in considerable threat- and in Wales, where there are perceptions among respondents to this research that changes to construction sector qualifications have not been consistently well received.
- Employers largely perceive that the current construction curriculum does not keep up with industry needs. The FE sector must adapt to the rapid technological developments and adoption of modern/digitally enabled construction site practices. However, the sector faces significant challenges due to funding cuts, difficulties in recruiting and retaining competent tutors and ambiguity of on-going qualifications reform.
- Respondents believe that there is insufficient funding for the construction FE sector. This lack of funding results in outdated facilities and classrooms, as well as difficulties in allocating budgets to purchase raw materials.
- Learner destination data is inconsistent and hard to access in a consistent, reliable format that would facilitate trend analysis. This inconsistency hinders effectiveness of current provisions in advancing FE learners into the sector.
- Sector image can be a barrier to attracting new entrants to FE to train for a career in the construction industry. Culturally, a construction sector career (and those that teach the qualifications) appear to be held in higher regard in some other countries, compared with England, Scotland, and Wales.
- Critical success factors for good quality provision and transition into a construction sector career are identified as:
    - Tutors come from a trade background and maintain their industry knowledge via regular site visits
    - CPD for tutors takes place on a regular basis and includes future skills needs relevant for the construction curriculum, not just the status quo
    - Curriculum content keeps up with industry needs, notably including coverage of digital / modern methods of working and MMC
    - Work placements give regular exposure to sites for learners
    - Strong relationships between college and employer(s) facilitate work placements
    - Regional groups of construction sector employers, colleges and (in some cases) other industry stakeholders, where these exist on either a formal or informal basis, yield significant positive benefits for FE learners

The Further Education Landscape

- There are two main types of education that learners can participate in post their secondary education: Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). FE includes study that is not part of HE (not part of an undergraduate or graduate degree).
- FE offers academic, vocational and recreational courses with difficulty Levels ranging from basic skills courses through to apprenticeships and degrees.
- Courses are open to all, from school leavers to older adults wishing to build upon their skills to meet the needs of an ever-evolving workplace.
- The two main qualification levels achieved in FE for 16-19-year-olds are levels 2 and 3.
- FE lags behind HE in terms of securing students. This may be due to FE's lack of clear identity with few colleges able to accredit their own qualifications or those of others.
- The 2019 Auger review acknowledged the role of FE in providing higher technical and vocational qualifications at Levels 2 and 3 and stated that FE colleges needed a new mission and vision, backed by meaningful funding.
- FE often experience financial challenges and underfunding. Spending per student in colleges was 15% lower in 2021-22 than it was a decade ago in 2010-2011.
- There is appetite for reform of the FE sector, within England, Scotland, and Wales.
  - The post-school education and delivery landscape is undergoing transformational reform in Scotland
  - In Wales, a review of construction and building services engineering qualifications at Level 2 and 3 undertaken in 2018 by Qualifications Wales was an important driver of major changes to FE qualifications in the construction sector.

Types of FE provider:	
Colleges	**Employer providers**
Independent Training providers (ITPs)	**Third sector providers**
Local Authority (LA) providers	**Adult Community Education (ACE) providers**

Political, economic and social context affecting FE

The FE sector has had to respond to a barrage of political, economic and social challenges in the past few years. However, regular change and reform is not new to the FE sector, as described in the following sections containing a high-level summary of these changes in England, Scotland, and Wales.

Political

England:

- In December 2024, the Department for Education announced that 70% of qualifications previously set to lose funding through the qualifications reviews, including many BTECs, will now be funded until 2027. This marks a shift from prior plans to defund overlapping qualifications. Sectors such as engineering, business, and creative industries benefit from the extension. However, the Onsite Construction T Level will close to new registrations from September 2025 due to low demand and implementation challenges, despite initial expectations it would continue.

Scotland:

- The post-school education and skills delivery landscape in Scotland is undergoing transformational reform, with proposed revisions to the roles and responsibilities of public bodies in the new skills system.
- In June 2023, James Withers reported on his independent review of the skills delivery landscape, considering the skills functions and remits of Scotland's national public bodies and making 15 recommendations for future adaptations of the system to support the National Strategy for Economic Transformation. The Scottish Government's Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education and Skills accepted most of the recommendations in the Withers review.
- In January 2025, following consultation, the Scottish Government announced its intention to reform the skills delivery landscape. Responsibility for providing national training programmes, including apprenticeships, will move from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). SFC's responsibilities for funding Further Education student support will move to the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS), bringing this together with SAAS' existing responsibilities for Higher Education student support.
- The Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, which provides the legislative framework to the Scottish Government's proposal to reform the skills delivery landscape, was published on 6 February, with the intention of implementing these changes in Autumn 2026.

Wales:

- The post-16 education and skills system in Wales has and is continuing to undergo significant reform in the face of ongoing operational challenges.
- In the 2024/25 Welsh Government budget apprenticeship funding was cut by almost a quarter as part of a wider need to reduce budgets following the ending of legacy funding from the European Union.
- In 2025/26 the Welsh Government received additional funding as part of an agreement with the UK Government and increased the apprenticeship budget to £143m.
- The Establishment of Medr (The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) has seen a significant shift change in the skills landscape. For the first time, all aspects of post-16 education linked to Further and Higher Educations, Lifelong Learning, and Apprenticeships will fall under one body. Since August 2024 Medr has responsibility for the regulation, funding and oversight of these areas.
- Apprenticeship provision continuing to be an area under scrutiny with the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee commencing an inquiry in this area, following on from 'The Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales' (Lusher Report) in September 2023.

Economic

- An inquiry report released in mid 2023 highlighted an immediate issue of student retention, as well as the severe impact the cost-of-living crisis is having on students' mental health.
- Respondents say the on-going cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on the number of new entrants, and the attrition rate. General labouring on construction sector sites can be appealing as it provides immediate income.
- Rising costs for FE colleges have stemmed in part from increasing energy costs. One college said their annual bill had risen from £250k to £850k. A knock-on effect for FE colleges is being unable to look at refurbishment; there is a desire to upgrade outdated classrooms and equipment but not the funding to do so.

> The cost of materials has shot up and we get no increase in funding as a result – we beg, steal and borrow to get by - which is wrong and creates significant amounts of added pressure, stress and uncertainty. We are overcoming this at least in part through industry donations of bricks, pipes, sand etc. Employers know our culture and this brings a lot in.
>
> **FE college, Scotland**

- Most respondents point out that the delivery of construction sector FE is being affected by rising costs of raw materials.
- Tutor shortages has been a significant issue for the construction FE sector for some time, but respondents say this is worsening because of the twin effects of the cost-of-living crisis and the buoyancy of the construction industry after the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Social

- Respondents highlighted social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, believing that it has had a negative effect on learners' social skills and mental health. An immediate impact for FE colleges is that they need to fund more additional learning support; this can be a challenge considering funding cuts and rising costs.
- Construction sector stakeholders and college respondents note that entire cohorts can struggle if the impact of the pandemic was to have their actual grades inflated, i.e., some learners being accepted on to FE courses but do not have the literacy and numeracy skills to be able to undertake them effectively.
- Respondents believe schools do not proactively promote a career in construction , which is often perceived as a "last resort".
- Several respondents highlighted barriers from parents not keen on their children pursuing a construction sector career.

> We do have to deal with the prejudices and preferences of parents and families too – whilst many girls have no problem with the industry and want to join it, their families are sometimes harder to convince - particularly parents of those girls from ethnic minority backgrounds who view construction from that 'wolf-whistling builders on a dirty site' point of view.
>
> **FE college, Wales**

The picture for Construction Further Education training

- Anecdotal feedback from construction sector employers implies Level 2 construction related qualifications are frequently viewed as inferior compared with apprenticeships.
- Anecdotal feedback from the learner community suggests that learners tend to view Level 2 qualifications as a 'stop gap' rather than a clear pathway into construction.
- A study conducted by the Association of Colleges (AoC) in 2022 reported that 85% of the colleges were understaffed for construction, the most acute shortage for any subject. FE sector struggles to attract and retain potential tutors due to its inability to compete with the competitive salaries offered by the private sector.
- The outcome of construction FE provision in terms of its worth to the industry in alleviating skills shortages and skills gaps is broadly a function of:
  - Number of learners transitioning through FE to construction careers;
  - Number of existing construction employees upskilled or reskilled; and
  - Quality and relevance of the provision.

What is working well

- **Close relationship between colleges and employers:**
  Employers can provide feedback about curriculum content and design of delivery, visit learners in the college environment, provide access to work placements and have also made donations of raw materials to facilitate course delivery.

> FE can always be improved by bringing it closer to industry – this is the key I think – we should be working closely together to better understand industry needs and deliver in partnership with industry too.
>
> **Construction sector employer, Scotland**

- **Strength of relationships enables site/work experience for learners:**
  Respondents from both colleges and employer organisations overwhelmingly attribute site experience as a major influence on the learner and can make the difference between progressing into a construction sector career, or not.
- **Enhancement of existing provision-teaching modern methods:**
  Employers interviewed for this research agree that FE learners are most effectively prepared for the workplace if they have had exposure to modern methods used on sites.
- **Seeking to improve diversity in learner population:**
  Many colleges interviewed are proactively trying to improve diversity in their learner population, by increasing the number of female and ethnic minority learners.
- **Impacts of strong regional groups:**
  Strong relationships between employers and colleges can lead to opportunities for work experience, careers talks in schools and material donations.
- **Passion and commitment from college staff and tutors:**
  Experienced and committed tutors can be a critical success factor in engaging learners and encouraging them to stay in construction as a career.

What is working less well

- **Tutor shortages and issues:**
  FE colleges are experiencing challenges in relation to recruitment and retention of skilled/experienced construction tutors. It is becoming increasingly common – with the current economic climate acting as an exacerbating factor – for tutors to leave the FE sector and return to industry, where they can earn more money.

> It's tough to attract staff – industry pays far higher. There is a one-third staff shortage across FE (not just in construction). As a college we have been advertising for some teaching roles for over a year now for bricklaying and electrical courses. I'm not sure anything other than pay (and therefore increased funding) is the answer to this.
>
> **FE colleges, England**

- **Assessor shortages:**
  Colleges and employers highlighted concerns about a lack of assessors to undertake End Point Assessments (EPA), which can result in delays in achieving apprenticeships.
- **Potential government support to ensure sufficient supply of staff in construction:**
  Most respondents believe that additional and potentially ring-fenced funding is critical to helping with recruitment and retention, though some note that increased wages alone may not be the 'silver bullet.'

> Additional funding for colleges would allow staff to be paid higher wages which would help entice them from industry where they currently have greater earning potential. Lobbying of government by all parties must continue to increase funding for FE, particularly around apprenticeship standards that have stood still now since around 2017.
>
> **FE college, England**

- **Suitability of qualifications to meet workplace needs:**
  Several employers and colleges expressed dissatisfaction with the HNC and HND route in that learners cannot attain the blue skilled worker CSCS card as a result.

Perceived gaps in construction FE

- Feedback from employers and providers perceive gaps in relation to course content as well as the availability of existing courses. Employers emphasised that new content should not be created at the expense of maintaining enough high quality provision for existing, important trades.
- The most common theme is that the gap is generally in relation to keeping up with industry as it evolves, especially in relation to technology and how it is used on site.
- The common gaps perceived in current provision are:
  - Retrofit
  - Technologies and how they are used on site e.g., drones, iPads
  - 'Softer' skills: employability skills notably professional conduct, communication, and time-keeping
  - EV charging points: where they fit in, what needs to be understood
  - MMC: broad knowledge and ability to drill down into particular aspects
  - Managing a business: contracting, understanding of finances
  - Understanding and managing mental health.

Critical success factors highlighted by colleges

Respondents believe relevant course content, and its delivery, is highly dependent on close partnerships maintained between colleges and industry. Colleges point to a number of critical success factors:

- Having the exposure to what is actually happening on site
- Having enough time to be able to develop new teaching resources
- Having enough funding for the right materials, equipment and materials to deliver it
- Having enough physical space to deliver it
- Having skilled tutors to deliver it.

Above all, respondents say the most important factor is maintaining a close eye on industry developments – teaching on site would be the "gold standard".

Issues with destinations data

- Destinations data is not routinely collected in a consistent format which would make robust data analysis possible
- Some FE colleges attempt to collect their own data, but nearly all respondents say it is very difficult to gather; once learners have left, they do not typically respond to any further communications
- Most colleges and independent training providers ask for intentions of learners to be shared, i.e., what the learners expect to happen after they complete their course. Few have the resources or time to follow this up once learners actually leave, to validate the data – and those that attempt to do so find the response rate is so low that data is largely unreliable.

Financial validity of construction sector FE

- Most respondents that had access to financial data said funding for construction provision is not ring-fenced, and that any kind of additional weighting for the subject had been stopped due to overarching funding pressures.
- The most concern about the risk of stopping provision due to funding pressures was cited by Scottish FE colleges
- No provider (in any nation) is expecting to have to cease the delivery of construction courses imminently, but a small number say they have had to reduce their provision and focus on the most popular courses.

Opportunities for industry

UK and devolved governments should increase funding allocations to FE colleges to be used for:

- Modernisation and expansion of facilities
- Paying a tutor premium or some form of incentive to improve recruitment and retention (this may be temporary in light of the current economic climate)
- Facilitating site experiences for both tutors and learners, which may be in the form of funding practical aspects such as travel and PPE, and/or support for employers to provide mentoring and administrative support
- Mandating tutor CPD
- Recruiting and training more assessors
- Additional learner support specifically in relation to mental health
- Standalone employability provision (or incorporate this into existing provision).

- Consider whether fledgling construction academies can be supported with either funding or other forms of resource – where such organisations are seeking to bring together industry and college provision effectively by situating the learning environment on site.
- Considerations should be given to collaborative initiatives that can help alleviate immediate funding pressures. For instance, a group of colleges could share resources, facilities, and potentially even tutors.
- Learner destinations data should be mandated and reported in a consistent format to be collected by a central body. This could be CITB or could be managed by government departments in the respective nations.
- Careers, information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) should be strengthened with resources and activities to target parents as well as their children and should begin from primary school age.

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