

# CONSTRUCTING APPRENTICESHIPS; TRANSFORMING THROUGH SHARING

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As a result of a general dissatisfaction among construction industry employers with the current apprenticeship training in the UK a local training group, in collaboration with a further education provider and the Sector Skills Council for construction, developed an innovative training scheme. The claim of the Shared Apprenticeship scheme was to transform the learning experiences of construction apprentices by accentuating their craft skills development, broadening their vocational knowledge and sharing their on-site experiences through a consortium of employers. Whilst this three year, partly European funded, project is operated by the local construction training group it is managed by ConstructionSkills with the local FE college providing the underpinning skills development and extended knowledge. The project is noteworthy not least because it involves significant public funds and numbers of apprentices but it also attracts global attention from decision formers delivering similar programmes. This study explores the reasons for the Shared Apprenticeship project and considers similar schemes through literature review and interviews with stakeholders. Not everyone views this project as innovative or shares the optimism anticipated by the creators of the scheme and in this context the study especially scrutinises expectations and limitations.

Keywords: apprenticeships, shared training, construction skills.

## INTRODUCTION

The UK construction industry is dynamic, complex and very responsive to the economy. The sector is repeatedly used as a key economic indicator (Telegraph, 2008). However, there are differences in the structure of the construction industry in Wales compared with the UK (ConstructionSkills, 2009). In particular the repairs and maintenance sector which accounts for 37% of output in 2007, compared with 44% in the UK as a whole. Among the new work sectors, infrastructure in Wales was proportionally 3% larger than in the UK as a whole while public non-housing was 5% bigger. According to the same source construction output in Wales accounted for 3.7% of the UK total and is expected to grow at an annual average rate of 0.6% between 2009 and 2013, broadly in line with that of the UK. Total construction employment of 113,510 in 2007 for Wales is forecast to fall to 107,920 by 2009, and then rise by 4.6% to 112,860 in 2013.

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In their studies into the influence of SMEs on local training needs Naylor *et al.*, (2008) and Morgan *et al.*, (2008) identified an increasing emphasis on small medium enterprises (SMEs) leading to tensions within systems of skills delivery. Leitch (2006) found that the supply-side of education was dominating what gets delivered by the education and skills system which partly explains the imbalance of influence. National reforms in this area aimed to address concerns highlighted by SMEs. These mainly related to a lack of realistic provision in training type and levels, service, cost and quality. They argued that "although the subject has received little attention by way of methodical research", there existed a common belief that smaller firms lack influence in developing policy at a national level or implementing important training and workforce development decisions.

At a local level construction SMEs, in South West Wales, expressed concerns about the retention and attainment outputs of the current construction apprenticeship programmes both regionally and nationally (CCTAL, 2006). They claimed that industrial feedback also revealed low levels of satisfaction with the competency level being achieved. They posed the question "...is the current apprenticeship route appropriate for the Welsh construction industry?" According to Morgan *et al.*, (2008) such training groups in construction are emphatic about the importance of workforce development in enhancing business success. The point about skills and productivity was made earlier by Leitch (*ibid*) when he said there was a direct correlation between skills and business productivity. However, his recommendation to 'strengthen employer voice' has not yet been realised at a local level and is one reason why the local training group developed its own ways of addressing local skills shortages (CCTAL, *ibid*).

Steedman *et al.*, (1998) describe apprenticeships as acquiring skills and knowledge through a combination of structured learning opportunities in the workplace. They further refine this definition to include all the elements necessary to underpin future expansion. The key elements are comprised of high quality off-the-job training, special apprenticeship contract status and wages which reflect the value of the learning provided. However, a more unambiguous term for apprenticeship is used in this study which reflects the many contemporary descriptions of work-based learning programmes combining paid employment or work experience with on-the-job and off-the-job learning (WAG, 2008; LSE, 2009; UCU, 2009). The Welsh Assembly for Wales (WAG, *ibid*) asserts that this is why apprenticeships are unique stating they are delivered in partnership with themselves, employers and learning providers. This latter point is a good example of a Leitch (2006) 'principle' in practice although worryingly, an apprenticeship study by Westminster City Partnership (2007) found a general lack of understanding or awareness of apprenticeships.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the shared apprenticeship construction scheme in South West Wales.

## **THE NEED FOR AN APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM IN WALES**

The Welsh Assembly Government recognised the construction industry as a key driver in regional regeneration. In a special report on apprenticeships in the UK Steedman *et al.*, (1998) debated the considerable potential for promoting economic development. Although containing no specific academic sources in the text it claimed to draw on a large body of academic experts and commentary arising from a seminar on the subject. More recently, Griffiths *et al.*, (2008) referred to skills and employment as 'the foundation of a successful life and essential for a more prosperous

and more equal Wales'. Their report emphasised the need for Wales to have a "strong apprenticeship system" adding their commitment to safeguard apprenticeships and to integrate them within the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ). Further, they called for a stronger employer voice on employment skills claiming this provides a robust external challenge to the current system and will help to shape strategy and delivery. However, as Dainty *et al.* (2007) found most employers often respond to short-term skills needs and the construction industry continues to rely on outsourcing which contributes to the lack of high-quality skills further down stream. A Westminster City Partnership (*ibid*) study exposed disengaged and uncoordinated SME employers as a result of demands placed on them by the need to support apprentices during training. However, CBI Wales regard medium and large organisations as better suited to deliver apprentices than SMEs because of the resources available although there is much evidence to confirm the reality which is that it is the smaller firms who undertake on-the-job training (Morgan *et al.*, 2008).

### **THE SOUTH WEST WALES SHARED APPRENTICE SCHEME**

In 2007 the Welsh Assembly Government announced the piloting of two shared apprenticeship schemes one in the engineering sector (24 places) and the second in construction (48 places). Whilst these two schemes were developed differently they nonetheless share the same overall aim of a group of SMEs collaborating to share a number of apprenticeship places.

Although the construction shared apprenticeship scheme was initially conceived by a local training group in collaboration with the local FE college, the local authority later declared an interest in the process, became a member of the CITB-ConstructionSkills sponsored training group. One of the key concerns was related to funding and the potential problems of more students being enrolled than the local industry can support. In addition, since the meeting, there have been anecdotal stories about inappropriate training at Levels 1 and 2 across the UK which only serves to confuse issues. Notwithstanding, the outcome was a review of the Modern Apprenticeship (MA) programme in the authority (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2009). In this the rationale for joining the training group created the opportunity for the authority to adopt a more widespread strategic planned approach towards construction Modern Apprentices and engaging other Modern Apprentices schemes in the process. This is in sharp contrast to the previous ad-hoc appointment of trade apprentices on a three-year employment cycle. A further factor was the significant increase of investment in construction related projects planned over the next 10-15 years mainly as the result of the trebling of money for housing and modernising education programmes within the authority. A Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) report (Kiely, 2008), featured the construction pilot scheme as good practice in which it identified 'additionalities' as a particular strong feature. He mentions one example of a bricklayer learning additional modules in plastering thus developing "a multi-skilled apprentice that will play a key role in delivering WHQS in Carmarthenshire." The view that additionalities enhance apprenticeship training is also identified by Daly (2007) in which an Australian shared apprenticeship model in construction incorporates financial literacy and business skills in their final year. It was claimed that this addition to the scheme is able to develop and shape quality within the industry. A more recent UK example is explained by Moore (2008) in comments announcing extra modules for the first employer-led apprenticeship scheme in Northern Ireland. Moore argued that the inclusion of this added learning into the gas sector scheme enabled apprentices and their firms to offer clients a 'one-stop-shop' for all central heating services.

## Scheme structure

The first cohort of construction shared apprentices started their training in September 2008 following its launch in April that year. This pilot programme was initially developed between the sector skills council for construction, the local construction training group, a local FE college and the local authority. It was claimed that the innovative craft training initiative will assist construction firms to address the industry's skills shortage and will offer apprentices the opportunity to gain a wider range of relevant experience and skills through the sharing of on-the-job experiences from different employers (ConstructionSkills, 2008).

Table 1 below lists the current trades and cohort sizes involved in the construction pilot. At the time of writing year three trade groups have not been confirmed except the total annual cohort of 32 apprentices.

*Table 1: Trade areas (year 1 intakes) and group sizes (as at June 2009)*

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Carpenters	14	14	10
Bricklayers	10		10
Plasterers		10	
Electrical installations			6
Plumbers			6

## RESEARCH METHOD

The main vehicles for data collection in this study were semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with key stakeholders in the South West Wales shared apprenticeship scheme. Twelve shared apprentices and the same number of traditional apprentices from different trades were interviewed using the same open-ended questions that encouraged them to explore their perceptions and experiences of the scheme from pre-selection through to their current stage. The approach taken in interviewing the employers and other stakeholders was more informal and unstructured which allowed them the freedom to express their views openly (following Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). The question schedules were developed on the basis of issues highlighted in the literature review and initial anecdotal evidence and piloted within the early interviews. Since no changes were required all of the data collected were included in the research sample. This information was supported by valuable additional information gathered through informal discussions with a number of key stakeholders. These included those who manage and deliver the learning as well as those not directly related to the scheme but who influence or could be influenced by the outcomes.

Clearly research that relies on unstructured or informal means of data collection has significant limitations particularly in terms of the generalisability of the findings and reliability of the discussion and conclusions developed on the basis of the data. This is acknowledged and subsequent stages of the research address these issues in seeking to develop a more robust system for recording data within a broader research design. As noted in the introduction, this paper reports on the early analysis of the South West Wales construction apprenticeship scheme.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE KEY STAKEHOLDERS

This section of the paper explores the perceptions of key stakeholders including those of government, employers, learners and training providers. It investigates the levels of awareness and compares the views of the stakeholders as well as identifying common themes.

### Government perceptions

In recognising the success of the construction pilot scheme the WAG (2009) recommends the dissemination of shared apprenticeships throughout the public sector drawing on emerging best practice from the current pilot in order to encourage wider engagement. However, a previous engineering shared apprenticeship scheme in mid Wales lost its funding from the Assembly and subsequently the local partnership of employers and a local FE college closed the scheme (BBC, 2004). The Assembly had previously praised the scheme for helping to reduce a shortage of trades' people in electrical and electronics engineering (WAG, 2002). Clearly, without the financial support the small firms in this rural area were unable to sustain the scheme, the very reason why the funding was granted in the first place.

### Employer perceptions

On reviewing traditional apprenticeship training practices within the regional construction industry it was found that in the majority of cases construction SMEs were increasingly finding that they were not in a favourable position to offer appropriate learning environments for construction apprentices. They cite four main reasons for this:

- Specific work activities were not always available at the appropriate time for the apprentice to gain relevant work experience or evidence towards their award.
- There is a lack of certainty in employers' long-term work commitments and order book.
- Employers have a high expectation that their apprentices' productivity is maximised whilst endeavouring to facilitate the skills development of their apprentices.
- As occupational skills learned in apprenticeship are intrinsically highly transferable between different employers the fruits of one firm's investment are often appropriated by a competitor.

A number of employers argued that these factors created an unfavourable learning environment and ultimately both apprentice and/or employer become disheartened often resulting in a termination of employment or the poaching of the apprentice by a competitor for full time work. This does nothing to help or address the short term skills progression needs or the long-term skills shortage within construction industry. There is also a danger that apprentices might become disillusioned and leave construction altogether thus adding to the already poor image of the sector. This general dissatisfaction locally of traditional apprenticeship training was confirmed in a study by Morgan *et al.*, (2008) in which they found a number of employers held strong reservations about traditional apprenticeship training in the construction industry in particular "we lose too many youngsters to these schemes" and went on to suggest that no one firm should have ownership of apprentices.

Consequently, many firms in South West Wales feel that there is a high dependency on construction SMEs who lack the appropriate structure to facilitate the traditional

UK apprenticeship model. It was argued there is a need to develop a route which is better suited to regional demand in Wales and which will be more sustainable in delivering the Skills That Work for Wales agenda (WAG, 2008). The purpose of the scheme is to produce competent craft persons that not only meet local needs but also to meet the challenges of an ever changing industry. A Sector Skills representative for building services observed that "employers cannot afford to fund apprentices in their first year" and the local construction training group welcome the benefit of not having to pay wages to the shared apprentices during the first two years of an apprentice's training programme. However, higher year three wages may see attitudes change when this point in the pilot occurs later in 2009.

### **Learner perceptions**

Not all of the current learners on the construction shared apprenticeship scheme fully understand the scheme rationale although most speak of being "...a special group of apprentices." Those interviewed talked about "...being watched by many people...and being in many photos". One apprentice explained that the comments relate to the many visits by government officials and others which appear to show the course is special. Despite this lack of understanding the vast majority of the learners were able to distinguish between their training programme and those undergoing traditional apprenticeship training at the same college. The main difference they see is the extra time provided to develop their craft skills and an expanded range of learning such as alternative trade tasters and added technical and professional knowledge.

In response to questions on the sharing of employers nearly all said this is the best feature of the scheme. A minority expressed reservations saying that they preferred to be linked to a single employer because they "get used to the firm" or they enjoyed their experiences at a particular employer. A few said they felt secure in their employment because the training group "will always find them employers" whilst nearly all commented on the regular pay aspect comparing their position with that of construction trainees on full-time college courses.

When exploring how the scheme was marketed to them the majority of the apprentices said they were referred to the scheme after attending college interviews for traditional craft training programmes. This suggests the apprentices were already planning to enter the construction industry and were not persuaded into the industry through external 'advertising' of the shared apprenticeship route.

The current perceptions of those apprentices having been on the scheme for more than a year have not changed significantly except nearly all stated they would benefit from additional periods of work experience earlier in their training.

### **Training provider perceptions**

The local college had been actively involved in developing the construction shared apprenticeship scheme and all staff delivering the programme were able to explain its purpose and the main benefits of the scheme to the learner. However, when it came to the benefits to employers there was less understanding and nearly all had little knowledge of the scheme philosophy or aims. Nevertheless, all those questioned extolled the virtues of the scheme saying the average hand-skills of the current shared apprentice cohort is significantly better than their counterparts on traditional apprenticeship schemes. One major explanation of this is the additional time allocated to the development of the craft skills. None identified the screening/selection process as a major contributory factor. There is a strong willingness to succeed in the pilot not

least because there is much scrutiny but there is also a strong professional bond developing between the tutors and apprentices. Some tutors put this down to the extent of time spent off-the-job while a few talk about the calibre of the apprentices recruited.

It was clear that the key stakeholders hold differing views on the expectations of the shared apprenticeship scheme under discussion and these are examined further during the discussion below.

## **DISCUSSION**

The failure of past government VET initiatives prompted the local construction group to seek its own solution to skills development. In doing so it engaged more employers in the process of apprenticeship training. Griffiths (2008) stated that the shared apprenticeships schemes have proved 'a good way of developing apprenticeships in SMEs'. A view reinforced by a senior Welsh Assembly official at the launch of the new Pathways to Apprenticeship (PTA) scheme which is based on the scheme under discussion. The official spoke about the positive aspects of the schemes highlighting excellent retention and progression rates as well as "increased levels of outputs of these apprentices". At the same conference a senior Construction Sector Skills Council manager claimed the "intense skills development in the college [is] producing far higher skills level". However, since these comments by the government and Sector Skills Council were made before any of the shared apprentices have successfully completed their full programme they should be treated with caution. Notwithstanding, this WAG (2008) have committed themselves to a continuation of pilot approaches to shared apprenticeships through the PTA scheme and the evaluation of how these can be integrated into mainstream provision. It is claimed that the scheme "encourages the engagement of smaller employers" and creates a more "rounded work based learning" methodology for apprentices.

A shared apprenticeship scheme that closely resembles that of the South West Wales construction pilot has been successfully running in Canberra, Australia. The Master Builders Group Training scheme places apprentices with different contractors for varying periods over the duration of their training (MBA, 2009). The main philosophy of rotating the apprentices through various employers to broaden their skills mirrors the South West Wales model. Similarly the role of host employers in providing on-the-job experience is critical although these include sub-contractors unlike the Wales pilot which utilised the local authority to provide the range of skills development opportunities especially in repairs and maintenance. Another comparable element between the two models is the level of job security enjoyed by the shared apprentices and the receipt of pay while they learn on the programme.

In principle, the inclusion of the local authority into the construction shared apprenticeship scheme is sensible since it provides additional work experience for the expanding cohort of shared apprentices when, at the same time, the local construction firms are experiencing a down-turn in their order books. However, the preference of multi-skilling by Kiely (2008) is at odds with many local contractors who expect a more highly-skilled craftsperson in a specific trade. A second and more fundamental factor is the report's expectation that apprentices will be directly employed by the local authority or major contractors and SMEs thus revealing a significant difference between the report's recommendation and the shared apprenticeship original concept requiring employers to share apprentices.

In the Australian construction model the time spent at each job is determined by the needs of the host employer (MBA, 2009) but this is not clearly defined in the South West Wales pilot. Sadly, the innovative aspect of identifying the needs of the apprentice and then matching them with the available work amongst the South West Wales employers has not been fully utilised. This can be partly blamed on the consequence of the down-turn in construction activity although this has been partially mitigated by the involvement of the local authority in providing suitable work experience. In Australia, the Government has recently announced practical measures in support of apprentices at risk of losing their jobs and the training group has responded by widening the number of host employers to accommodate the apprentices during the down-turn (Miller, 2009). In Wales the response has been to roll out a modified version of the construction shared apprenticeship pilot to other parts of Wales. However, as yet specific details are unavailable but its main purpose is to hold, except for short periods on work experience, new apprentice starts on off-the-job training in the first year thereby relieving the burden on struggling construction firms during the global economic downturn.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study set out to explore the perceptions of the key stakeholders in the innovative construction shared apprenticeship scheme located in South West Wales. This initiative was conceived by a group of local construction SMEs concerned with the current arrangements for apprenticeship training which fails to meet their local needs.

Despite a lack of formal examination or evaluation of the scheme since its launch in 2008, a review of literature and public broadcast found senior government politicians and officers extolling the virtues of the scheme. On the basis of this and another similar scheme in engineering, the WAG has recently announced the expansion of comparable programmes to start September 2009. However, the planned Pathways to Apprentice schemes have one fundamental difference in that there will be no sharing between employers.

Although the construction shared apprentices interviewed were not able to articulate the aim of the scheme they were able to differentiate between their scheme and traditional apprenticeship programmes. Their perceptions of the scheme are high, especially the work experience sharing arrangement, although interestingly they view themselves sharing employers when the perception of employers is that apprentices are shared amongst them. They perceive the additional learning components as useful and the intensive skills development a major advantage over traditional apprenticeship programmes. There is a danger however that employers could view these apprentices as 'jacks of all trades' and this point should not be overlooked since a few employers and the local authority see a value in multi-skilled apprentices.

Employer perceptions are mainly positive so far in that they believe the scheme is delivering their agenda although not all actively support the work experience element of the scheme. This is an important element since employer engagement is a major cornerstone of the Leitch Review (2006). There is a difference of perception in that many decision formers see the cost of hosting the shared apprentices as minimal whilst some employers cite decrease worker productivity as a reason why they cannot continue to provide the work experience which is the cornerstone of this development.

Off-the-job training providers perceive the intensive skills development as the main benefit of the scheme. However, the exact reason for this is not fully explained but



may be inextricably wound up in the funding arrangements. Surprisingly, there are mixed views about the shared aspect from employers' with a few questioning the value of this part of the scheme during the recession whilst others argue this as a very good reason for continuing with the shared principle.

The original concept of the South West Wales construction pilot was the development of practical craft skills to a level acceptable to local employers and at least to the industry standard of Level 3. However, the requirements of European funding and constant measures to demonstrate progress has diverted the key measurements of practical skills to the achievement of nationally recognised qualifications. The danger perceived by the training provider is the re-direction of the original targets to suit measures already regarded as inappropriate by local SMEs.

With the rollout of similar schemes in Wales there is an urgent need to pay attention to the outcomes of pilot schemes by way of methodical research. Although a small-scale local study this research has identified a number of positive features in addition to raising important questions to take forward as part of a more comprehensive study.

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