

DN Colleges Group – Pathways to Construction project

The idea for our Pathways project was brought about because of the severe skills shortages in the Construction sector. We in Education were aware of the distinct lack of investment made by the sector in the preceding years which was exacerbated by the aging workforces and then the recovery from recession. Apprenticeship were the tried and tested way to bring skills to the sector, but the recession forced the industry to reduce its commitment to on the job training.

As we exploded out of recession, the demand for skilled trades people grew but an apprenticeship was a longer process that the industry could afford to wait for. In the desperation to recruit, employers were quick to criticise the Education sector for not being able to provide the skilled labour and wider lobbying began. The Government incentivised Apprenticeships and CITB were ploughing money into new calls to address the imbalance of skills.

I piloted a Pathways project which provided intensive training for 10 weeks and rolled out a cohort of 'semi-skilled' workers to access the plethora of vacancies. Although not fully skilled, these staff were able to work productively on a building project and be rewarded with a reasonable improver rate of pay. I submitted this same project outline to CITB to be considered for funding support and a wider distribution of skill development which eventually this could be Nationwide.

I engaged specific partners into the bid to manipulate their involvement through the project.

- DWP JobCentre Plus would be the recruitment arm and their commitment was assured by writing them into the bid
- Keepmoat Homes were the large employer who had the supply chain to provide placements and job opportunities. Again, selected partly due to their locality to DN College, but also to enforce their commitment.

In summary, the project would see JCP support recruitment of 12 mature participants every 3 months, from various disadvantaged background of our community. Two weeks of intensive skills building would permit successful candidates to access phase 2. Four weeks of further skills building but followed with a placement (phase 3) through the Keepmoat network. Upon successful completion, progression into a job, apprenticeship or further study at the College (Phase 4). Also included throughout the learning cycle were 'soft-skill' qualification to help prepare the students for work.

We knew from the outset that we were being adventurous with the self-declared targets. The market we were trading in is notorious for drop out, disengagement and resistance to progression. However, with the sector in desperate need for a new pool of talent, we were inundated with interest from both the students and employers. Alongside the ambitious curriculum content was an even more ambitious target of 40% into employment. We had built a drop-out into the project expecting that 20% would leave at the end of each phase of delivery but were shocked by the actual figures.

Phase		Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3	
		plan	actual	plan	actual	plan	actual
1	Basic skills	10	12	10	7	16	16
2	Advanced skills	8	12	8	7		
3	Placement	6	12	6	7		
4	Employment	4	7	4	5		

Table showing first three cohorts and their retention at each phase – Cohort 3 being suspended due to Covid

I feel that our programme was unlike any other in that it had a tripartite agreement written into it from the start. All three factors being included – Recruitment, training and Employment. With this model we were unsurprisingly one of the more successful provisions within the Pathways projects.

I fully understand the reason why CITB decided to close this project down but feel this was very shortsighted when considering the shortages of staff in the Construction industry. Covid 19 will not reduce that demand but more likely increase it and here was a chance to prepare students for the wave of opportunity, whilst delivering work ready, staff to the employers. Even now, in the third lockdown, the sector is continuing to work because of the necessity to build. We could still be delivering the same programme and providing the same outcomes; skills staff for a starved industry.

Nick Rudkin