

8. Lessons from abroad: the need for employee involvement, regulation and education for broad occupational profiles – the case of construction

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It is a commonplace of political rhetoric for at least three decades from all parties that Britain needs 'world class skills' and that more should be done to provide them. The odd thing though is that decline in provision seems to come in inverse proportion to the passion of the 'skills' rhetoric. The example below of the construction sector is an extreme but not untypical one of what has been happening to the vocational education and training (VET) system.

The latest figures for first year trainees for the construction sector provide an indication of this reality and a shocking indictment of the British VET system. This sector was once, next to engineering, one of the key industries in which apprenticeship flourished, underpinned by a statutory levy-grant mechanism and regulation through the Construction Industry Training Board. In 2005-6, however, of 38,447 first year construction 'craft' trainees, just over half were involved in work-based training of some sort and the remainder were on full- or part-time courses in Further Education (FE) colleges. Only 10,308 were following an apprenticeship programme, mainly at Scottish/National Vocational Qualification (S/NVQ) level 2, with far higher proportions to be found in the north of the country than the south (CITB 2006). This represented a much lower ratio of overall trainees to operatives than found in, for example, Germany or Austria, where there are 40 apprentices per 1,000 employed, compared with only about 11 in England (Steedman 2010).

Ten years later, and despite all the efforts by government to promote apprenticeships, construction trainee numbers in Britain had fallen to a historical low in 2015, with 11,586 to be found training in the same occupations, only 35 per cent of whom were undertaking some kind of work-based training. About 3,000 were following an apprenticeship programme, still mainly at level 2. In the past two years alone, trainees in the wood trades have fallen by 30 per cent from 6,725 to 4,536 and in bricklaying by 40 per cent, from 3,982 to 2,364 (CITB 2015). To compensate, employers in Britain have increasingly come to rely on recruiting workers trained in other countries, so 'poaching' from VET systems elsewhere. How can we begin to explain this calamitous decline?

The most immediate challenge confronting work-related VET all over Europe is the changing nature of the labour market. For the construction industry this has been especially pronounced, with extensive subcontracting, significant use of agency labour, the spread of what is known as 'bogus' self-employment, together with precarious and short-term employment, and widespread use of migrant labour (European Institute of Construction Labour Research 2016). Nowhere are these developments more apparent than in the British construction sector, which employed nearly two million people in 2014, of whom almost half (924,000) were classified as self-employed, coming under the Construction Industry Scheme, which represents a special tax status or employment subsidy for those who are 'self' rather than 'directly' employed (UCATT 2015, Seely 2015). Added to this, 91 per cent of the 251,647 firms in the industry in 2014 employed fewer than 13 employees and over 50 per cent under three employees (ONS 2015).

Such a labour market does not provide the training infrastructure required to support young people into work, especially given the considerable health and safety risks on construction sites. At the same time, 36 per cent of employers in a 2013 survey of 809 construction firms reported hard-to-fill vacancies, whilst only 14 per cent offered apprenticeships, symbolising what might be regarded as employer disengagement in VET (CITB 2014). Despite this disengagement, an increasingly highly qualified workforce is required in practically every area of construction activity, even more so now given the abstract competences and knowledge demands of low energy construction which require each and every construction worker to be thermally literate. How can this shortfall be addressed?

Changes in the labour market inevitably imply changes in the nature of VET. This chapter looks at other countries to identify which aspects have most contributed to maintaining a training infrastructure. We focus specifically on the construction sector because it is both a classic apprenticeship sector and an industry with similar importance and a similar range of occupations in different countries.

What is apprenticeship? UK and elsewhere

Understanding what is going on in British VET is a bit like entering an Alice in Wonderland world where nothing is quite what it seems. Apprenticeship is a good example. The term 'apprentice' with its feel-good connotations of tradition, intergenerational stability and craftsmanship has tempted politicians seeking to boost their credentials in expanding opportunities for young people to badge all kinds of qualifications and training programmes with the 'apprenticeship' label.

Thus in England apprenticeships can be at a low level (NVQ 2 rather than 3 or above), short (as little as one year) and can also be nothing more than the retraining of existing employees, as indicated by the considerable growth in so-called 'apprenticeships' for those aged 25 and above. Unlike apprenticeships found in most of northern Europe, apprenticeship qualifications tend to be narrow in their scope of job activities, to cover a range of jobs rather than being confined to negotiated and recognised occupations, and to be concerned almost exclusively with 'training' rather than any broader educational objectives. In the case of NVQ level 2 apprenticeships (the majority in England), any technical theory relating to the particular framework and occupational activity is kept to a minimum and the focus is on immediate workplace skills rather than on the knowledge, skills and competences needed to develop long-lasting occupational capacity (Clarke et al 2013).

The first and most obvious difference between a construction apprenticeship in UK and that in many other European countries lies in how it is defined. Indeed 'apprenticeship' in Germany is something of a misnomer as the VET system that developed in the 1970s and is still in place today explicitly distanced itself from 'apprenticeship' (*Lehre*), with the 'apprentice' (*Lehrling*) becoming instead a 'trainee' (*Azubildender*). An 'apprenticeship' in the German construction industry is for three years and is the equivalent of above NVQ level 3. It is carefully structured, usually in 26 week blocks, with half the year in the workplace, for the trainee to learn under productive and market conditions, and the remainder divided between the college (*Berufsschule*) concentrated on classroom education and a training centre concerned with innovation and simulation in workshops. The system is known as *Stufenausbildung*, whereby the 12 occupations into which the construction industry is divided are covered by all trainees in a common first year, followed by gradual specialisation in the second year into either 'Building', 'Finishing' or 'Civil Engineering' and only specialising into a specific occupation such as bricklaying or dry assembly in the third year.

The system in Denmark, which succeeds in having an even higher ratio of apprentices to employees (one to four), is similarly structured, though longer at three years eight months. As in Germany, it finishes with a recognised qualification, which has a high labour market currency in the sense that those employed are expected to have acquired this as a prerequisite. The goal in both these countries is to develop the knowledge, know-how and competences of individuals through a mandatory curriculum in a particular occupation so as to equip them for a long-term future working life. The underlying pedagogical principle is that trainees learn how to apply theoretical knowledge and to manage projects on their own.

These examples highlight a key aspect of apprenticeship in these countries: the concern with education and simulated learning, and the focus on independence in learning and action. Indeed it is no accident that in most developed continental countries VET and apprenticeship come under the

education system. In contrast, the short duration of apprenticeships in England, combined with minimal requirements for off-the-job training, translates into much weaker educational content. For construction occupations, the off-the-job element may be on the basis of day release. This has minimal educational content compared with the well-regarded Standard Scheme of Training of the 1970s, which – in line with the continental model – was for a minimum of three years and based on block release, with 13 weeks in college and off-site workshops, and then 13 weeks on site, in rotation. Nowadays, however, apprenticeship in Britain is labour market-, rather than education-, focused. It comes under the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and aims to impart ‘skills’ to meet the short-term demands of employers, generally on the pedagogic principle of ‘learning by doing’ based on the generalisation of different experiences (Clarke and Winch 2004). As a result, the role of the FE colleges, responsible for the educational component, tends to be remarkably underestimated and underfunded.

It is salutary to remind ourselves that for about 40 years after the Second World War everyone on a VET programme in England and Wales was engaged in broader educational objectives such as personal and civic development, as well as acquiring the knowledge and know-how to do the job. Admittedly this was sometimes not as well carried through as it might have been and the absence of an assessed element on many of these course components compromised their credibility with younger learners. But instead of building on and improving what existed, the focus of VET qualifications has been deliberately narrowed. This stands in stark contrast to the aim of VET in countries such as Germany and France to develop individuals, workers and citizens through their VET programmes.

Different models of VET – regulation

Another key difference between the system in Britain and its counterpart in many other European countries is the nature of regulation. Whilst the British system is doggedly employer-based, the systems elsewhere – whether in Scandinavia, France, Germany, or the Netherlands – are based on the state and the social-partners (trade unions and employer representatives). The trade unions participate in decision-making, including in negotiations concerning the development of occupational qualifications and changes to them, in the workplace through the works councils, and in Germany even in the examination boards of the Chambers (Clarke and Herrmann 2004). There are clear institutional links between the education systems and industry, and between the vocational colleges and the labour market. And qualification levels are reflected in collectively agreed wage rates, so that workers have a defined and recognised status in society. This is why the currency of occupational qualifications in the labour market is high in these countries: many employers recruit directly from the colleges and it is increasingly difficult to work on a construction site without a recognised occupational qualification.

In contrast, in the British employer-based system, short term interests predominate. There is no built-in involvement of the trade unions, or the FE colleges, though this was originally envisaged with the post-war Industrial Training Boards, which have only survived today in the form of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB). In all other industries the ITBs became voluntary bodies in the 1970s, whilst in the 1980s the CITB and ECITB became employer-led rather than bipartite and union involvement became minimal (Brockmann et al 2010a).

Employee involvement is critical to the ensuring the long-term interests of the workforce for a VET system that provides recognised occupational qualifications, with labour market currency over a working life and sufficient permeability to allow career progression to higher level qualifications. In countries such as Belgium, France and Germany, employee representation is ensured through the works councils, which exist in most firms. In Germany, for instance, these have a remit to ensure

that the apprentice programme is adhered to, that trainees' suggestions are taken up in negotiations, and that trainee representatives are elected, as well as suggesting improvements for the benefit of the firm. This helps to provide a training infrastructure in the workplace, even in a situation of declining trade union density and employer membership in their respective associations. The overall employer density rate in Germany, based on the share of employees working in establishments affiliated to an employers' association, is now under 60 per cent, but employees are represented through works councils in over 80 per cent of large firms over 250 employees, though to a far lesser extent in smaller firms. In comparison, employer density is just over 30 per cent in UK, and employees are represented in some way in only 60 per cent of large firms and in under 20 per cent of all firms (EC 2015, p216, Chart 5). The weakening of employer and trade union representation over the past decade in both Britain and Germany is therefore in the German case compensated by a robust regulatory framework and a clear system of employee representation in the workplace in the form of works councils.

Nevertheless, in the construction sector throughout Europe weak employee representation has contributed to a decline in work-based VET provision. In Germany, for instance, the number of bricklayer apprentices fell from 36,010 in 1999 to 14,391 in 2007 (Brockmann et al 2010b), although the current influx of refugees is giving rise to an increase in the number of construction trainees. Another factor contributing to a decline is that many large employers no longer employ operatives and smaller firms and subcontractors may not have the means, the finance, the incentive, the personnel or the time to train. For the British construction industry, where these tendencies are especially accentuated, this means that long gone are the days when training was something that a benevolent employer provided through apprenticeships, apart from some exemplary schemes in the public sector and on large projects, such as the Olympics and Heathrow Terminal 5. In addition, a class barrier has been erected as the majority of construction training (over 80 per cent) is focused at level 2. This has made it almost impossible to progress and develop a career along the traditional path from skilled operative, to trades foreman, general foreman, site agent, project and contracts manager.

Occupational capacity versus trades

The overriding prevalence of short-term employer interests and adherence to 'skills training' rather than 'vocational education' in the British case is reflected in the nature of qualifications. The qualifications for traditional 'trades' in Britain have become narrower and narrower over time. There is not the clear process of negotiation found in Belgium, the Netherlands or Germany between employers, employees and the state educational authorities to define the scope of different occupational profiles. As a result, the scope of activities covered is extremely restricted in comparison. For bricklaying trainees today, for instance, it is largely confined to the 'skills' of laying bricks and blocks.

The VET systems in most European countries encompass far more competence and knowledge elements. A bricklayer in Denmark covers many aspects not in the core curriculum in Britain, including: in terms of know-how or practical skills, concreting, plastering, cladding, flooring and insulation; in terms of non-manual competences, communicating, dealing with waste, quality control, ordering and assessing materials; and, in terms of knowledge, a foreign language, sciences, technical drawing, citizenship, labour law, materials and environmental protection. As in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and other Scandinavian countries, the Danish construction VET system is comprehensive, encompassing broadly defined occupations that embrace all activities in the industry, including groundworks, concreting, drylining and machine operation. In Britain, however, a major weakness is that the vast majority of construction trainees are still to be found in the traditional trades of carpentry and joinery, bricklaying, painting and decorating, plastering, heating and ventilating, plumbing and electrical work, even though these employ less than half the

construction workforce. The remaining areas are relatively 'no-go' for the purpose of formal, regulated training.

Conclusions

From this assessment of VET in other European countries, the key features that appear fundamental to its maintenance are: the educational component and simulated learning; a comprehensive regulatory framework; employee involvement and representation; and broad-based occupational profiles. However, one particular aspect seems crucial for the future development of a qualified workforce: VET as the link between education and the labour market is shifting away from the labour market side, based on employment in a firm, as this becomes more and more fragmented. As a result, 'learning by doing' - largely characteristic of traditional apprenticeship - is no longer an option. The workplace is becoming more peripheral as a place for VET. Instead, the college classroom and simulation in workshops - or, in the case of construction, special trainee sites - are indispensable given the increasing need for higher level qualifications. Any VET system also has to be in tune with the globalisation of the labour market and education, particularly with the gradual implementation of the European Qualifications Framework and other tools, and thus to be transnationally valid.

Successive British governments and, with some notable exceptions, British employers and trade unions have failed to address this. Programmes that express a spurious pragmatism based on 'learning by doing' and 'workplace credibility' persist, despite the dangers of simply reproducing yesterday's skills and not taking on board the rapid changes in activity that affect most economic sectors. To take just one example, to respond to the technologies of near zero energy construction depends upon a more broadly educated, thermally-literate, workforce with powers of independent action and judgement. Not only is the construction VET system ill-equipped to develop such a workforce, but the need to do so is not enthusiastically embraced by either industry or government. The Government's introduction of a training levy in 2017 on firms with a pay roll of more than £3million may do little to change the situation, especially for the construction sector where a levy-grant system already exists, covering all firms with a payroll of over £80,000. There is a real danger that firms elsewhere may simply cut their training budgets to compensate for the cost of the levy if they do not see the need to increase investment in the development of their workforce (Pickard and O'Connor 2016, Keep and James Rely, this volume). A major policy transformation is therefore needed to create a VET system that is fit for the future.

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