About the Scottish Building Federation

The Scottish Building Federation (SBF) is the principle trade association representing employers in the Scottish construction industry. Our membership comprises hundreds of construction businesses located throughout Scotland, ranging from local building firms through to major contractors.

Employment and skills in Scottish construction

The Scottish construction industry has experienced strong growth in recent months with levels of output returning to pre-recession levels. However, levels of employment within the industry have failed to keep pace with this growth in output. The number of apprentices being registered by the Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council (SBATC) has increased over the past two years with 1,553 construction apprentices registered with SBATC in 2014. Although once more showing signs of growth, apprentice recruitment remains significantly lower than pre-recession levels which peaked at more than 2,700 building apprenticeship registrations in 2007.

Official statistics from the Annual Population Survey suggest that the Scottish construction industry has shed more than 50,000 jobs since the start of the recession. In this context, the requirement to grow the skills pipeline is now a critical challenge to future industry expansion.

The Q4 2014 Scottish Construction Monitor, a quarterly survey of the membership of the Scottish Building Federation, also identified a more intricate picture, highlighting varying occupational needs in key trades and managerial positions across different areas of the country.

It is also worth noting that growth in output from the Scottish construction industry has been characterised by spikes in output from certain sectors, notably public infrastructure, whereas rates of growth in other sectors such as housing and repair and maintenance have been noticeably more subdued. Ensuring balanced growth across all industry sectors will be crucial to future employment prospects within the industry. This is particularly pertinent considering the higher levels of apprentice recruitment the currently more restrained sectors of the industry have traditionally supported.

SBF action on skills

The Scottish Building Federation has identified four key areas in which action has been delivered to address the industry’s skills needs;

- Apprenticeships – SBF’s apprenticeship registration body, SBATC, ensures that apprenticeship qualifications are fit-for-purpose and reflect employer demand. Recent enhancements include the introduction of CSCS apprentice cards through the strengthening of health and safety training and the delivery of relevant CPD activity for college lecturers.

- Occupational Health – Constructing Better Health Scotland was established in 2014 as the national scheme for the management and promotion of occupational health in the construction industry. The CBH launch was supported by CITB and incorporates an ongoing initiative to train leaders on the importance of effective absence management, wellbeing monitoring and employee support and intervention.
Sustainability – ‘NETpositive’ was an innovative project which created an online sustainability appraisal and strategic action plan tool with supportive training seminars which aimed to provide the industry with a structured approach to improving our sustainability credentials.

Management Development – SBF continues to deliver bespoke training programmes to member companies concentrating primarily on people management and employment affairs. In conjunction with likeminded federations, SBF is also promoting the subsidised delivery of the NVQ level 6 Diploma in Construction Management.

Reflections on measures to raise Scotland’s educational attainment

As demonstrated above, Scottish Building Federation members share a commitment to developing and sustaining a skilled workforce within the Scottish construction sector.

A critical element in delivering this is effective communication of the many and varied career opportunities now available to young people within the construction sector. As an industry, we need to do more to attract new talent through projecting a more positive image of the sector in addition to overturning outdated perceptions that the industry can only offer low-skilled, low paid manual work, which is far from the modern reality.

To this end, we welcome intentions to strengthen Careers Information, Advice and Guidance in schools, particularly activity in this area which is focused on early intervention. Whilst it is recognised that in many areas of the country there is no shortage of demand for contraction apprenticeships from school pupils, it is also acknowledged that more modern, interactive and online careers guidance will provide a platform to widen the pool of potentially interested applicants and facilitate more informed career decisions which can only be of benefit.

A greater focus on vocational training and employability skills in schools would also be welcomed and if accompanied by a corresponding attitudinal change to more substantially value the worth of vocational training, in line with more traditional academic pathways, could play a significant role in raising attainment for all students.

Such vocational training could also provide an ideal platform to further address gender imbalances within vocational training, allowing the strengths of the industry and the potential career opportunities to be experienced by all.

However, a significant level of concern remains regarding proposals to create ‘foundation apprenticeships’ in craft occupations. Such reservations are broadly categorised below;

- Practical issues – incorporating a meaningful level of apprenticeship training into the traditional school timetable would be challenging, practical based training can be resource and labour intensive, instructors would have to be suitably qualified and trained to recognised industry standards and health and safety requirements would be restrictive.
- Training issues – embedded within the apprenticeship model is an inherent interaction between the competencies taught during off-the-job training and the opportunity for apprentices to practice such skills in a live environment on a daily basis. It is unlikely that such opportunities could be provided to pupils undertaking foundation apprenticeships.
- Progression issues – if candidates undertake training that is accepted towards partially achieving elements of the Professional Development Award (or equivalent) through the foundation apprenticeship model, there would be very limited options available for further
progression should the candidate not immediately benefit from an apprenticeship when leaving school.

Instead, we would prefer to see the existing pre-vocational qualifications such as Skills for Work and the National Progression Award in Construction utilised more creatively. SBF is currently involved in a consultation exercise to update and enhance such courses, embedding work experience units, concentrating on employability and health safety and providing access to a wider range of crafts and occupations. Such taster courses may be more deliverable and may also be of more benefit to pupils at that stage in their development.

Conclusion

SBF broadly supports many of the recommendations contained within the Wood Report and the themes highlighted in the more recent Skills Investment Plan for the Construction sector and are keen to see the introduction of practical measures to attract more young people into the construction industry and to ensure that the transition from school into the world of work is as smooth as possible.

This should include the promotion of stronger links between industry employers and schools and access to practical careers advice and vocational training to prepare young people for work as a core part of the curriculum. As a better alternative to the proposed introduction of foundation apprenticeships, we would like to see broad based pre-vocational training utilised more effectively.