

CLR-GB

Newsletter 4/2007

The **CLR-GB** Office is a platform linking CLR activities at EU and GB levels as well as trade union and academic work in GB in the field of Construction Labour Research. It will support related initiatives specific to GB.

Introductory Note:

The workshop on VET in construction announced in the previous newsletter has taken place. The resonance was surprising and demonstrated the importance of the subject. It was perfectly clear that the discussion about it is still at a rudimentary stage. Transformation in the industry has undermined traditional routes of skill development and uprooted vocational training from the educational system as whole. Because of the disparity, it is also difficult to report on the interventions and discussions. It was however encouraging to meet a community of committed experts, keen to work on a coherent strategy.

Coming back from the workshop I felt unable to write my report for CLR-News and decided instead to make a few notes of my subjective perception and think of how to continue work on this site (see below).

For this CLR-GB Newsletter I then asked for help from a number of participants, namely to do the same as me in response to my notes. The response to this request is the main contents of this Newsletter, always written in a personal capacity, as a rather spontaneous expression after the event.

The debate will go on, partly based on current comparative research on the concept of skills across Europe. Linda is thinking of taking a group to a training centre in a continental country.

We shall convene the Annual Meeting of CLR Great Britain on 7th December 2007 at the University of Westminster after a seminar on Migration. Hoping to see you there,

Jörn Janssen/CLR-GB October 2007

Comprehensive vocational education for a sustainable construction industry: challenging a fragmented and narrow skills structure

Seminar, 29th September 2007, University of Westminster, in association with CLR

Jörn Janssen/CLR-GB:

This workshop - on a crucial issue in Great Britain and uniting about a dozen invited speakers and an audience of *the* experts from training providers, employers' federations, trade unions, and universities - seemed to be a golden opportunity to put forward a message. But the reality of the chaotic structure of training provision was reflected in the interventions to the extent that there was little chance for a coherent discussion to develop. This does not mean that there was a lack of excellent contributions, but these were disrupted by interventions seemingly unaware of the overall incoherence and conceptual poverty in British training policy. For instance, it remained a mystery how 'Skills Academies' related to vocational training in Further Education Colleges.

It was significant that speakers from trade unions, employers' federations and academia alike expressed

their utter desperation about the present state of vocational education in Britain. But they do not appear to cooperate in a united front to do something about this emergency. A strategy is needed, but at best some initiatives try to patch up the misery, in particular a training scheme for concreters, set up by 'Construct' - a group of concrete contractors. Typically also training attached to large projects, such as Heathrow Terminal 5 and the Olympic Games facilities, come to be regarded as opportunities to bridge the skills gap, though there is little evidence of significant training provision in both cases.

Can CLR-GB give some assistance in an attempt to develop a strategy under the auspices of the social partners and academic experts? Certainly Britain has something to learn from continental counterparts, especially in the construction industry. A joint campaign group ought to spring up and seek to develop a concept digesting the best of existing practice and debate across Europe.

Patrick Bowen/ConstructionSkills:

Thanks for your 'report'. It is all a bit emotive. Words like 'emergency', 'utter desperation', 'misery' etc. seem a little loaded and I am not sure where the evidence to support this analysis is derived from. You state there is an 'overall incoherence and conceptual poverty in British training policy' - this may or may not be the case, but a 'coherent and conceptually rich policy' - which bares no relationship to the industry in which it fits - may be as bad. Incidentally, you need to be clear about who in Great Britain it is you want to influence - you can no longer talk about a VET policy for GB - Leitch for example only applies to England as does the housing green paper. The education and skills Bill includes Wales. Scotland is something else again.

As to the skills academies it is not surprising that you find them a mystery given the two or three minutes we had to explain their derivation. I can provide more detail on how these fit into the overall structure (much of the training will be delivered by FE - but not necessarily in the classroom). While we wait for/creed the new Jerusalem we need to find novel ways to engage employers to develop people, that is the ultimate purpose of VET, the academies will help this.

On the workshop I think the group was a bit diverse. While the philosophy of VET and pedagogy of young people is useful, it is not the natural ground of industry, especially employers. Trying to merge the academic with the practical can often mean losing the best of both sets of views and encourage people to retreat to the anecdotal and the particular. Without wanting to constrain diversity, perhaps some restructuring is required.

Paul Chan/University of Northumbria:

An observation was made from the presentations, discussions and debates that two 'systems' seem to co-exist alongside each other: one that is codified, and the other perhaps less codified. On the one hand, there are the established pathways tied to the formal training and education system, e.g. through recognised national qualifications, apprenticeship routes, graduate training etc. Such a codified 'system' focuses on targets such as the attainment of narrowly-defined occupational standards, levels of competence (NVQs), and quantitative performance measures like completion rates. On the other hand, there is the socialised concept of skills development that could take place in the workplace, through on-the-job training and mentoring relationships between senior and junior employees. The socialised 'system' is at present less codified and happens in an ad hoc fashion, especially in the voluntarist system in Britain.

Incidentally, I found this quote in Grugulis (2007) who suggested "Technical and professional expertise may be the produce of politics and consensus, but it is generally agreed by professional bodies, educationalists or experienced and expert workers. [...] Soft skills, in marked contrast to this, are defined by the employer who also specifies how they should be demonstrated and the means by which they may be assessed (p. 89)". I believe there is partial truth in this. Certainly, some employers would have their own thoughts on what constitutes technical and professional expertise that is missed out by the consensus built among professional bodies, educationalists, or experienced and expert workers as we have seen in the case of Mitchellsons' and their work in developing a qualification pathway for concrete. Nonetheless, this lends support to the notion of the two 'systems' of the codified and less codified (socialised). For a comprehensive VET system, there needs to be a consideration of both the codified and less codified 'systems'.

I'm still developing my thoughts on this.

Michael Cross/The Navigate Group:

I think your report is a fair reflection of the workshop, but I think also there are some good developments in a number of sectors in the UK. Construction is a worry as it is so connected to others in terms of skills - they share skills with about 9-10 sectors. A number of sectors, like nuclear, and oil and gas exploration, are developing very focused, and effective schemes.

I've suggested to Linda that she builds on the workshop, and extends its depth and breadth.

Stephen Gruneberg/University of Westminster:

While I agree that construction training in the UK is haphazard and clearly a cause for despair for many

people at last Friday's seminar, there needs to be an attempt to understand the causes of the situation. No remedy can be devised if the underlying reasons for the present provision and the response of both employers and labour are not identified. The aim of any strategy to deal with training in construction is to mitigate the effects of these causes.

As far as taking the discussion forward in a practical way, I think we identified a problem at the seminar. The next stage is to define standards and show how and to what extent existing provision falls short. The next stage would be to discuss the causes of poor standards in training. Only then can a strategy be agreed that has a chance of meeting the needs of those in the industry and indeed the industry itself.

Tom Hardacre/Amicus:

We can be in no doubt that an entire industry exists on the basis of providing training for those operatives either entering or already engaged in UK construction. The seminar, if nothing else, allowed us to come to terms with the complexity of this industry. In that respect it should be applauded for encouraging delegates to seek a far more rationalised structure.

The subsequent debate has also focused attention on the simple fact that the UK construction industry cannot develop a long term reliance on transient migrant workers or third party agencies, neither of which provide a sustainable solution to the growing skills shortage faced by the industry.

**Joe Johnson/
Civil Engineering Contractors Association:**

The VET Seminar confirmed to me that many people in academia do not understand the problems that are being experienced by employers in the field. The landscape of qualification is very complicated and employers have neither the time nor the inclination to be able to wade through it to determine what qualifications are valid and what skills a person has who holds that qualification. There needs to be a simplification of the process and then a period of time, probably five years or more, where nothing changes. This will allow employers the opportunity to grow familiar with the qualifications structure and will also allow them to attach a value to the qualifications. Employers also need to understand that, if they want to train their own people, they must invest in the infrastructure to achieve this. This, for larger employers, will mean developing operatives to become assessors and pay the going rate for being an assessor.

Neil Mitchell/Mitchellson:

I agree with your sentiments completely, particularly your opening point that "this is a crucial issue in Great Britain".

The real problem is that there are too many and varied vocational training providers. What was clearly evident from our discussions at the VET Seminar was the lack of a coherent and clear direction forward. Regrettably each group centred on their own position of delivery.

Our construction industry needs a national strategy on full and indeed comprehensive training. One unified body to look after all Vocational Training is a must, sooner rather than later. Yes indeed, this skills gap can be provided by Skills Academies or Vocational Colleges. There are many such organisations around Europe in which we can model from. The Construction Skills (CITB) and individual provider route is not the way forward.

I do add my agreement with Stef. There are many good efforts in training at present. However I would emphasise that the volume of VET training overall is very small indeed. We need a much increased volume of VET training to meet the capacity we will need over the next 25 plus years, not just for the Olympic or immediate needs.

Stef Stefanou/John Doyle Construction:

Having attended the seminar and having read the email exchange between yourself and Pat Bowen my view is that there is a cocktail of confusion surrounding training in the industry. I think you are correct when stating that there is no real coherent industry training policy at present. However I do not think the current cocktail is that bad on the taste buds and it most certainly cannot be described as a failure. The construction sector now employs some 2.2 million people and if one believes the statistics, that is an increase of 600,000 in 10 years. Most of these people have training and have not dropped from the heavens above "ready made". Also you only have to look at some of the magnificent building recently constructed around London to see that things are actually not that bad.

Nevertheless I agree that things could and should be better. Most of the principal contractors do not train anymore. With the exception of the Civil Engineering Contractors and Laing O'Rourke all the meaningful training is undertaken by the specialist contractors for all the various disciplines. Therefore one should not be too surprised that any policy aimed at the Principal Contractors almost always fails before it gets off the ground. What is needed is a policy that rewards, encourages and helps those that actually do the training ie those that actually employ the workforce. That policy may not be as coherent and as ordered as academia may like, but it will in my view be the policy that is most effective.

LABOUR IN 'NEVERNEVERLAND': Regulating the situation for migrants in the British construction industry

JOINT WORKSHOP:

University of Westminster (Westminster Business School & School of the Built Environment) and

Northumbria University (School of the Built Environment)

in association with the European Institute of Construction Labour Research (CLR)

University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS (just opposite Madame Tussauds and nearly opposite Baker Street tube station)

**Friday December 7th, 10.30am - 4.00pm,
Room M323**

followed by: CLR GB AGM 4.30pm – 6.30pm

10.30am	Registration and coffee	
10.40am	Welcome	Prof Linda Clarke
10.45am	<i>What is happening?</i> - Migrants or foreigners? - The trade union view - The employers' view	Jörn Janssen Bob Blackman Gerry Lean
11.45pm	<i>What research is going on?</i> - Migrants in the NE - the migrants in East London - Mgency role??	Phil Cohen Ian Fitzgerald tbc
12.45pm	Lunch	
1.45pm	<i>What is being done?</i> - Health & safety - Wage Transparency - organizing/recruiting - RIFT	Senior Partner Bernard McCauley tbc Jan Post
3.00pm	<i>Discussion: What can be done?</i> Led by: - across Europe - between Poland & UK	tbc Jan Cremers tbc
4.00pm	<i>Tea/Coffee</i>	
4.30pm – 6.30pm	CLR GB AGM	Chair: Jan Cremers

If you would like to attend, please contact:
Linda Clarke: 0207 911 5000 x 3158
clarkel@wmin.ac.uk

Or Ian Fitzgerald: 0191 227 4362 or
ian.fitzgerald@unn.ac.uk

To Our Readers:

The CLR-GB Newsletter is the organ of exchange for CLR in Great Britain. This function depends on the co-operation of its readers. The editors ask everybody who is interested in construction labour to contribute with information and commentaries.

In this particular case we most cordially invite you to contribute to the debate about vocational education in the construction industry – or generally.

Please send your suggestions, articles, information, letters, etc. to

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