CAN CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING HELP ADDRESS THE UK CONSTRUCTION SKILLS SHORTAGE?

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The UK is facing a construction skills shortage and is struggling to attract youngsters to the industry. This paper explores the potential value of corporate volunteering as a mechanism to address this problem. Despite volunteering being one of the most common forms of corporate social responsibility strategy employed by construction companies, there has been no research in this area in construction. To address this gap in knowledge, a single in-depth case study of a national UK corporate volunteering program which focusses on students in disadvantaged schools is presented. This research contributes new empirical evidence to understanding the potential impact of such programmes on recruitment. The results show that by engaging construction professionals and students in a problem-based learning environment, students emerge more knowledgeable about the construction industry, more motivated to engage and clearer about potential career paths. This is particularly the case for students whose style of learning does not suit traditional classroom based education and for female students. In particular, such programs appear to be effective at developing intrinsic attributes and soft skills which are valued by employers as crucial to future career success. Based on these results we conclude that there is some evidence that corporate volunteering could make a contribution to addressing a looming skills crisis in the UK construction industry.

Keywords: corporate volunteering, Corporate Social Responsibility, skills shortage

INTRODUCTION

While the exact definition of corporate volunteering is contested, it is widely accepted to mean a non-monetary, formally planned and strategic commitment by a commercial organisation to encourage and support its employees to contribute their time, skills and knowledge to support community groups and not-for-profit organisations working in the community (Allen 2012, Roza et al., 2013). A significant increase in business interest in corporate volunteering in recent years has been noted by Rodell et al., (2016) and Zappalà (2003) put this down to three main drivers. First, is the growing trend towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social reporting and the need for businesses to be seen as good corporate citizens. Secondly there are increasing expectations by employees for their employers to provide them with opportunities to give back to the communities in which they operate. Third, there is growing interest in corporate volunteering from the community and not-for-profit sectors as they experience a shift towards more enterprising business models in response to trends in New Public Governance which place more

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emphasis on the business, government and not-for-profit partnerships in the delivery of welfare to the community.

Such trends are also evident in the construction industry and while there is a growing body of CSR research in construction over the last decade (Murray and Dainty 2008, Loosemore and Phua 2011, Barnes and Croker 2013), there has been no empirical research into corporate volunteering in the sector. The aim of this paper is to address the gap in knowledge through a single case study of a major UK school-based corporate volunteering program involving construction companies. More specifically, focusing on the school student as the unit of analysis, the aim of this paper is to capture the impact on potential recruitment through the mobilisation of qualitative research methods. This focus on youth recruitment is important given the looming skills crisis facing the UK due to its long-term under-investment in training and apprenticeships, its reducing and ageing workforce, its poor public image, its low attraction rate to youngsters and potential shortfalls in skilled labour brought about by Brexit (Farmer 2016, Martin 2017). More broadly, our focus on the recipients of volunteering is novel and important since most research into corporate volunteering identifies volunteers as the unit of analysis and considers the business case for volunteering initiatives (see for example, Hamilton and Fenzel 1988, Pajo and Lee 2011, Rodell 2013, Ockenden and Stuart 2014, Walsh and Black 2015 and Rodell and Lynch 2016).

The Impact of Schools-Based Corporate Volunteering

As Walsh and Black (2015:8) point out “Volunteering has a wider set of benefits for individuals and communities that have economic, social, cultural and political dimensions”. While there has been research, albeit limited, into the broader community benefits of general volunteering, there has been very little research into schools-based volunteering programs. However, the relatively limited research that has been conducted has identified numerous potential benefits for the students involved, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. These potential benefits include: better school attendance; greater confidence; higher work output and efficiency; higher grades; better work-readiness; better matriculation; less poor behaviour; improved social skills; improved literacy and numeracy; improved employability; improvement in critical thinking, analytical reasoning and logical abilities; and better progression to work and university (Henderson and Mapp 2002, Stanton et al., 2011, Walsh and Black 2015). Other documented benefits include: broadening student learning experiences; building confidence in interacting with people from the world of work; becoming more work-ready by building understanding of work demands, expectations and environments; and exposure to different educational and job experiences and ways of learning for those pupils whose learning styles do not suit traditional classroom environments. In particular, research by Polidano and Domenico (2013) shows that by integrating work-based learning experience into the upper-secondary curriculum significant benefits can be derived from improving the educational engagement and post school pathways of less academically inclined students.

Other studies such as Boeck et al., (2009) and Wu (2011) have shown how the individual benefits from volunteering programs discussed above can also spill-over into students’ families and communities producing multiplier benefits such as: local economic development; building community social capital and cohesion; breaking down negative stereotypes of different social groups; fostering better understanding of other cultures and religions; solving social problems; making communities safer; bringing people together from different backgrounds; and helping other be more active in their community by
going on to volunteer themselves which, in-turn, brings a whole set of additional benefits. Holroyd and Silver (2001) and Roza (2013) also show that volunteering programs give young people access to inspiring tutors and mentors who can act as role models which are often missing from their lives.

Importantly, schools can also benefit greatly from corporate volunteering programs. For example, school education can be enlivened and made relevant, difficult students can be engaged, curriculum and learning facilities can be enhanced, staff resources can be released, new knowledge can be delivered to students and school/community relationships can be strengthened (PC 2010, Roza 2013, The Centre for Mental Health in Schools 2016). More generally, corporate volunteering programs can provide schools with access to low cost and pro bono commercial services; to private sector management skills; to innovations and business mentors; to better relationships with business; and even financial and in-kind assistance with basic backbone infrastructure such as learning materials, equipment; computers, office space and administration support. Allen (2012) indicates that through these benefits schools can attract new talent and energy to their cause and bring new innovations and fresh perspectives to their operations, thereby enhancing their legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders.

It is important to note that in addition to the many claimed benefits of corporate schools-based volunteering there are also a number of potential downsides which have been identified. For example, Daparle (1997), Martiniuk and Negin (2012) and Bartlett (2013) show that volunteerism, is a double-edged sword with many risks, as well as opportunities, which if not effectively managed can be more harmful than good. For example, while most volunteers are well meaning, they may lack the skills to interact effectively with beneficiaries and there are also significant costs for receiving organisations in selecting, monitoring, inducting, training and managing them, especially when they are only present for short periods of time, as many volunteers are. Short-term volunteerism is often not the best use of limited financial and human resources and it is also very important to be clear about what volunteers can and cannot do. Many for instance will not have the training, skills, personality and stamina to work with children with special needs and as well as there being consequences for the students it may also burn out volunteers emotionally. Bad mentors or uncaring volunteers who volunteer for compliance or selfish reasons, can have a particularly negative effect on vulnerable teenagers, reinforcing negative experiences of uncaring and failed relationships from their past.

**METHOD**

The focus of our research was an accredited schools-based corporate volunteering and engagement programme called Budding Brunels run by a major not-for-profit (Construction Youth Trust). The Budding Brunels programme, which uses a work-based learning model, has been running since 2004 and has engaged with 1,156 students over that period. The program focusses on engaging with young male and female students from disadvantaged backgrounds in schools, academies and further education colleges in deprived areas of the UK. The aim of the programme is to develop industry awareness and employability skills, creating opportunities for school students to feed into construction company apprenticeship and graduate schemes.

While we recognise that there are limitations with single case study research, the advantage of our approach was the depth of insight which multiple case study research could not provide (Yin 2009). Furthermore, there are common lessons to be learnt across all types of corporate volunteering programs which means that our results, while not
generalizable in a statistical sense, may hold important insights in other contexts (Allen 2012). Finally, as Flyvbjerg (2006) notes, it is not always desirable to generalise research results and that good quality single case studies are of enormous in-depth value as highly valid narratives in their own right. Indeed, in support of our approach, single case study research has been widely and successfully used in a number of volunteering research projects (see for example Pajo and Lee 2011).

In line with the traditions of single case study research, data about the impact of the Budding Brunels programme was collected using a range of methods. These included: a post-program survey; a pre and post outcomes measurement tool called a progress web; reflective diaries and student workbooks completed by students who were given industry placements. Data was collected across five runs of the program which took place in 8 Schools, 5 Academies, 1 College of Further Education with five different construction industry firms as partners. This mix of quantitative and qualitative methods is discussed in more detail below and the purpose of the data collection was to help the students articulate, in their own words, the affective (feelings and emotions), cognitive (knowledge and learning) and behavioural (career plans) aspects of what they gained from the volunteering experience (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). The data collection process was also designed to identify intrinsic (happiness, self-esteem and confidence etc.) and extrinsic (educational achievement, literacy and numeracy etc.) outcomes associated with the volunteering program (McNeil et al., 2012, Robles 2012).

Narrative analysis was used to analyse our qualitative data, an approach which has evolved from what has been described as the narrative turn in social science research. In adopting Reissman’s (2008) approach to narrative analysis we employed three approaches: thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic/performance analysis, and visual analysis. The thematic analysis involved keeping the respondent stories intact and emphasising the words, phrases and themes used in the narrative over its structure, content and form. The structural analysis looked into the ways in which these narratives were structured, categorizing aspects of the respondent accounts guided by the research cited above which identified a range of motivations, cost and benefits associated with volunteering for each stakeholder group. In effect, these costs and benefits became our initial coding strategy. Dialogic/performance analysis focuses on performed accounts and asks questions around when and why, viewing stories as social artefacts which say as much about the organisation, society and culture as it does about the individual respondents. In line with narrative analysis research, the results of this analysis are presented below in a narrative style. The response rate to the survey was 100% giving a sample of 103 useable responses and the final sample structure is shown in Table 1.

The results of our progress web analysis showed significant increases in all measured categories, particularly in cognitive outcomes (147%) and extrinsic outcomes (147%). The largest single variable change was in ‘knowledge of the construction industry’ (particularly for the female candidates). Of all the candidates that went through the program 87% said they wanted to pursue a career in construction compared to an estimated 50% at the start of the program. Interestingly, our results showed that female students entered the volunteering the program with a generally lower score than the male students and while this self-confidence increased to a comparable level by the end of the program. The results also show significant diversion between male and female responses in many outcomes and that the main benefit for the female students who attended the program, compared to their male counterparts, was the work experience and increased knowledge about career paths in the construction industry.
These findings are perhaps not surprising given evidence that most young women see the construction industry as a male dominated domain and are often discouraged by their families, parents and teachers to enter the industry and not given the same opportunity to learn about it in schools and at home (Powell et al., 2010).

Table 1: Sample details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students (number, gender, ethnicity)</th>
<th>School, Academy and Sixth Form College Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 total - 2 Female, 6 Male, 6 BAME, 2 white British</td>
<td>School - Serves an area with high levels of social deprivation from a diverse community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 total - 1 Female, 18 Male, 15 BAME, 4 white British</td>
<td>School - The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is higher than average. Academy - A well above average proportion of students receive support through the pupil premium, which is additional government funding for specific groups including children who are looked after and students known to be eligible for free school meals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 total - 4 Female, 14 Male, 18 white British</td>
<td>School - Most pupils are of White British heritage, with only a few from minority ethnic backgrounds. There is no data on free school meals for the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 total - 3 Female, 18 Male, 18 BAME, 3 white British</td>
<td>Academy - The proportion of students who are from minority ethnic heritages is above average, as is that of the students who speak English as an additional language. School - The school population is mainly White Male with a lower-than-average proportion of students from ethnic groups. School - An above average-size high school serving an area of considerable ethnic and cultural diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 total - 7 Female, 10 Male, 15 BAME, 2 white British</td>
<td>School - One of the largest sixth form colleges in London. The very large majority of students at the college are from a minority ethnic heritage. School - The proportion of disadvantaged students known to be eligible for the pupil premium (additional funding for children who are looked after and pupils known to be eligible for free school meals) is above average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 total - 8 Female, 12 Male, 10 BAME, 10 white British</td>
<td>Sixth Form College - The college population is mainly White British with a lower-than-average proportion of students from other ethnic groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103 students total - 25 Female, 78 Male, 64 BAME, 39 white British</td>
<td>8 Schools, 5 Academies, 1 College of Further Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: BAME: British. Black, Asian, and minority ethnic

It was also notable that while the female students started from a lower average score in every category, they also had the highest gains in all categories and especially in the ‘cognitive’ and ‘extrinsic’ components which indicates that they learnt a significant amount of new factual knowledge about the construction industry. Despite these encouraging responses and the significant increase in knowledge of the industry (191%), the relative lack of increase in knowledge of career paths and behavioural intention to pursue a career in the construction industry among the female cohort was disappointing. Our results suggest that for young women, increased knowledge of the construction industry may not produce an incentive to engage and that other strategies need to be put in place alongside such programs to overcome this potential risk. For example, recent research suggests that lack of female role models are a critical aspect of encouraging more young women into the construction industry and keeping them there (Lockwood 2006).
Analysis of student diaries and workbooks showed that most of the cited benefits (56%) were affective and intrinsic in nature (fun/enjoyable/interesting/eye-opening/exciting/inspiring/social/collaborative/teamwork). This supports work-based learning research (Adams 2014) that the emotional benefits of such programs are significant and important in terms of motivation. In further support of the extensive literature on work-based learning, the results also indicate that many students found the experience a new and engaging way of learning which contrasted with traditional school-based learning (Cunningham et al., 2004). In particular, the qualitative data showed that the activity-based learning (field trips/site visits, model building competitions) were an important part of enriching the learning experience for the students and provided insights into the world of work and their place in that world, which many of the students had never visualised or experienced before. Of the students, 38% said that the site visits were the most enjoyable part of the volunteering programme. This supports research by Kisida et al., (2015) who argue that field trips provide students with a living laboratory, enabling learning through hands-on active engagement and experience to expand beyond the classroom into the wider community, providing experiences that cannot be achieved in school, but which are an integral part of school instruction.

I liked visiting the construction site because I learned more and [this] pushed me more into working to my role

There were also clearly benefits for the students in building team work skills and appreciating the importance of collaboration in work.

I enjoyed working in a group as I met new people and learnt new things about them and how to work - improving my team working skills

The volunteering program also changed the students’ view of what construction professionals do. In particular, the stories of the professionals they met, shadowed and interviewed during the program motivated the students and changed their view of what they could do in their own lives and what they needed to do to become such a professional. This supports Binder’s (2011) research into the importance of stories in education which shows they are important for deepening student learning experiences and creating opportunities for pedagogical change by enabling teachers and students to explore and reflect on personal practical knowledge and position their own lives and future paths.

The interviewing of the professionals because it helped me find out what is involved in becoming [part of] that trade/profession and enlighten me on different jobs with construction

The interactions with the industry professionals also appeared to clear common misconceptions about the construction sector which tends to be seen as a low innovation, traditional and labour-intensive industry in the public’s eye (Loosemore 2014).

Initially I thought construction is not innovative and does not involve the technical nature of engineering. However, I have discovered construction is a diverse industry which is constantly innovating via engineering

The program also opened the students’ minds to future career paths they had not envisaged before, supporting research by Change the Equation (2015:15) which shows that opportunities to interact with professional mentors encourage students to become more interested in STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Maths) careers and the types of skills required for success in this field and the workplace more broadly.

…yes it definitely changed my view, it shows me there are so many different roles within the industry
When asked what it would take to get to a similar position as the professionals they met, every student was able to articulate at least three strategies which included gaining work experience (36%), going to university (45%) or acquiring particular skills which they saw had been important to their mentor’s career success.

…reliability, communication, teamwork (inspiration), research and interpreting data” – mentor performance improvement manager

…passion, communication between different strata of the industry, time management, building rapport” – mentor asset manager

What is striking is the similarity between the core attributes which the students saw in their mentors, regardless of profession and role. It is also interesting that while the number of attributes was diverse, the vast majority (91%) of the attributes listed were soft skills rather than hard skills. This supports findings of Change the Equation (2015) that students engaged in work-based programs gain an understanding of workplace norms, including the soft skills that can influence career success. It is particularly interesting that the results align so closely to the attributes which Robles (2012) identified, from a survey of senior business executives to be the most important ten skills for business success: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic.

These results above are very positive. The only negative comments from students revolved around logistical issues such as time taken to travel to sites, location and facilities and their desire that there be more field work and that the program should be longer to capitalise on potential learning opportunities. Other issues included a lack of skills brought to the course from school in making presentations and in completing the paperwork necessary to complete the course. This is a typical reflection of the different skills needed by students in work-based and traditional learning environments (Change the Equation 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to address the lack of research into corporate volunteering in the construction sector by addressing the question of whether such programs could help to alleviate the predicted labour shortage in the UK construction industry by recruiting more school students into the industry. Results from an in-depth single case study of one of the UK’s longest lasting and successful schools-based volunteering programs show that volunteering programmes can have a significant impact on the career choices, aspirations and employability of adolescent students who are about to enter the world of work. By enabling new connections between construction professionals and students who might not have thought about working in the industry, the results show that students appear to emerge more motivated and clear about potential careers and career paths and what is required of them to succeed. This is particularly the case for female students, although our results indicate that they may need extra support in the form of more female role models and mentors during the program to prevent negative gender stereotypes being reinforced.

Last and not least, the results show the importance of active team-based and goal-directed exercises in building these skills and of work-place learning as an alternative and enjoyable blended learning experience for students who might not be academically strong or suited to learning in the classroom environment. In particular, the imparting of appreciation of intrinsic attributes and soft skills as key to future career success developed through this alternative pedagogical model contrasts strongly with the academic messages around knowledge acquisition imparted by traditional classroom based education. More
Corporate Volunteering and UK Construction Skills Shortage

Research is needed into corporate volunteering in construction and in particular into the potential risks for beneficiaries, volunteers and organisations involved in supplying and receiving volunteers. We are aware that are results are largely positive and suggest that more research is undertaken into the potential downsides of these programs. However, based on these results we conclude that there is some evidence that corporate volunteering could make a contribution to addressing a looming skills crisis in the UK construction industry.

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