

# THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS CAREERS ADVISERS IN ENCOURAGING NEW ENTRANTS INTO CONSTRUCTION

Paul W Chan<sup>1</sup> and Michael Connolly

*School of the Built Environment, Northumbria University, Ellison Building, Ellison Place, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK*

Despite studies and initiatives into tackling the problem of skills shortages, the lack of new entrants into the industry is worrying. Take-up of Modern Apprenticeships in Construction is low. Furthermore, research suggests that school children are not aware of career opportunities in construction and many do not undertake activities that instil interest in construction at school. This research attempts to plug the gap by exploring the perceptions of schools careers advisers in encouraging new entrants into the construction industry. Through interviewing eight careers advisers in five secondary schools across the Northeast of England, the study examines the process of giving careers advice to potential school leavers and the careers advisers' perceptions towards the construction industry. The findings reveal that careers advice is given to students about the construction industry. However, this process is less than ideal and contains pitfalls that potentially prevent access of information about construction careers to the students. On a more optimistic note, the careers advisers' perceptions of the construction industry appear somewhat positive.

Keywords: careers advice, perceptions, pupils, schools, skills shortages.

## INTRODUCTION

The problem of skills shortages in the UK construction industry is well documented (see Department for Education and Employment, 2000; Agapiou, 2002; Dainty and Edwards, 2003). Studies have been undertaken to identify short-term means of mitigating the situation. Mackenzie *et al.* (2000), for example, provided a comprehensive list of responsive strategies that employers would subscribe to combat the problem. This included the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS), greater stability of the industry and a shift towards direct employment. Furthermore, there have been industrial initiatives aimed at boosting the image of the industry (e.g. Delargy, 2001), ranging from popular culture with the fictional cartoon character "Bob the Builder" (Moore, 2001) to more mainstream initiatives of engaging with non-traditional groups like women and ethnic minority groups (see Dainty *et al.*, 2000; Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2005).

Despite these studies and initiatives, the lack of new entrants into the industry is worrying. For instance, a MORI (1998) poll suggested that school children were not aware of career opportunities in construction and many did not undertake activities that instil interest in construction at school (e.g. building blocks). Incidentally, take-up of Modern Apprenticeships in Construction is low (see Learning and Skills

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<sup>1</sup> paul.chan@unn.ac.uk

Development Agency, 2003; Dainty *et al.*, 2004). This has contributed to concern over the future capacity of the industry to meet the predicted increase in construction output (Office of National Statistics, 2006). This is especially pertinent given forthcoming development work in preparation of Olympics 2012. Construction employers, however, have been found to possess traditional mindsets about new recruits into the industry. According to Clarke and Wall (1998), the notion of taking on young trainees, in particular school leavers, is favoured over the retraining of adult entrants. Therefore, in building up future capacity, it is argued, necessitates a deeper focus on the efforts made in schools in promoting the construction industry as a possible career route.

Indeed, the learning experience and awareness of career opportunities developed at school are instrumental in a school-leaver's decision of course of action in life. Hodkinson (1998), through interviewing 115 prospective school leavers, found that decisions about careers tended to be made in a rational manner, often dependent on the careers guidance obtained. However, there is little research evidence to investigate how careers guidance in schools actually contributes to the encouragement of new entrants into the construction industry. A vast amount of research have instead focussed on either employers' (demand) strategies towards the skills shortages situation or training provision (supply of training) within the industry. Because of the relative dearth of empirical research in establishing the perceptions of the construction industry, this research attempts to plug the gap by exploring the perceptions of schools careers advisers in encouraging new entrants into the construction industry.

The paper is organised in three main sections. First, the paper briefly reviews the literature surrounding perceptions and image of the construction industry, which revisits the argument of a diminished role of vocational education in UK society. The immediate section that follows provides an outline of the interview process with careers advisers in five schools in the Northeast of England. Finally, the emergent findings and preliminary conclusions are discussed.

## **IS THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY TABOO?**

The construction industry generally suffers from poor public image. Moore (2001), for instance, begins his article with: "[...] the majority of the general population [...] in the UK do not perceive constructors as being in anyway professional [...] the general population make reference to constructors through the use of derogatory terms such as 'cowboy builders' (p. 177)". The term "cowboy builders" also featured in Murray's *et al.* (2001) review of the literature (deriving from both anecdotal evidence and sociological observations), which emphasise construction work as dirty work. These characteristics resonate with the Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) poll in 1998, which found that 16-year old school pupils perceive the construction industry as a low status, dirty and lowly paid industry to work in. The poll also suggests that pupils who are attracted to construction as a career route chose the industry because they want to work with their hands, thereby connecting the industry with manual work.

As far as it is known, the MORI (1998) poll was the last large-scale survey into school pupils' perceptions of the construction industry. Nonetheless, the findings from the poll have been rehearsed in a number of subsequent writings. For instance, Moore (2001) commented that the industry fails to attract school pupils with high academic achievements, who are often drawn to other sectors (Dainty *et al.*, 2000). Langford

and Robson (2003) also made a fascinating analysis of cinema representation of two built environment professions – the engineer and lawyer – and discovered that “[...] cinema values the product of engineers as part of the process of making films; the lives of engineers are of little interest; in contrast, the legal profession is valued as a centrepiece of ‘real life’ dramas (p. 804)”. Indeed, the limelight appears to shine on certain professions whilst casting shadows of doubt on others, all of whom in principle deliver the built environment. Another notorious example is the demarcation between design (the architect) and construction (the builder) (see Moore, 2001), which serves only to aggrandize the much-criticised fragmentation of the industry.

Arguably, such polarisation does little to improve the image of a vocational sector like construction. More worryingly, the UK government’s policy towards attainment of 50% participation rate of higher education (see Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and lukewarm reception of the Tomlinson (2004) report’s (see Department for Education and Skills, 2005) recommendation for greater emphasis of vocational education reinforce the polarisation. The attitude of public policy-makers in this respect signals a preference for academic skills over vocational, which does no favours in boosting the image of construction. To exacerbate the situation further, there is also erosion of the vocational skills content provided by the apprenticeship system, which the industry has until recently relied on for the provision of the skilled workforce (Clarke, 1999; Clarke and Winch, 2004).

### **The need to explore the perceptions of school careers advisers**

The poor image of the industry creates a downward spiral effect for the recruitment, retention and development of a skilled workforce that is necessary to deliver the growing output in the UK. Moore (2001) suggests that academics and practitioners are aware of the existence of negative stereotypes, but that “little evidence exists of the UK industry’s reaction to this situation (p. 177)”. In other words, very little practical steps have been undertaken to reverse the negative image of the industry. Of course, there are a growing number of initiatives that lend support to this course. For example, the Construction Industry Training Board runs, for a number of years, the National Construction Week aimed at offering school pupils insights into construction work. Specifically in the Northeast of England, where this study originates, ‘SETPOINT’ (<http://www.setpointnortheast.org.uk>) has been developed to enable construction companies to perform outreach work in schools to promote the industry, although the initiative has a wider remit of science and engineering.

To reiterate, the central tenet of this study is the need to develop the future capacity of the industry through school pupils. The primary motivation of the research is to understand how this can be done through careers advice. This is based on the assumption that careers advice received by pupils in schools has an impact on the future career pathways of the pupils. This is supported, for instance, by Bandura *et al.* (2001) who through empirical testing during a longitudinal study of 272 children found that educational practices and the cultural environment of educational establishments have an influence on pupil’s perceived academic and occupational efficacy, which in turn affects their career trajectories. In a similar vein, the importance of careers advice in schools was highlighted as a pertinent issue when encouraging under-represented groups like ethnic minorities to become a built environment professional (CABE, 2005).

However, as with many jobs in the modern organisation, the role of the careers adviser in schools is intensified (Morris *et al.*, 2000). At the same time, research conducted in

Scotland into pupils' satisfaction with careers advice (Howieson and Semple, 2000, 2001a, 2001b) observed, among other things, that pupils trusted the advice given to them by advisers that they have grown to know. These issues with careers advice in schools give rise to at least two implications that are of concern to the present study. First, the trusting relationship between a school careers adviser and the student can be so strong that it can become dangerous if the views of the adviser are misinformed, especially in terms of perceptions towards the construction sector. Second, the intensification of the role of careers advisers purported by Morris *et al.* (2000) could mean that time is increasingly reduced for careers advisers to develop more informed understanding of the various occupational sectors that are available. Consequently, careers advisers may rely on their personal (possibly biased) views, which in turn could influence pupils' career decisions in a way identified by Bandura *et al.* (2001).

Therefore, this study attempts to investigate both the process of giving careers advice in schools and more importantly, the perceptions of schools careers advisers of the construction industry. This study will also explore if there is a link between the perceptions and the advice given to pupils when making career decisions. The next section will detail the process of conducting the initial interviews with school careers advisers in the Northeast of England.

## THE INTERVIEWS

A letter providing a brief explanation of the rationale of the research and the anticipated involvement was sent out in January 2006 to head teachers from twelve schools of close proximity to the research team in the Northeast region of England. There were two key considerations when designing the research methods. First, because of the exploratory nature of the intended study and the desire to obtain a deep and rich picture of careers advice in schools, the interview technique was pursued. Due to time and cost constraints, distance therefore became a principal factor in the design of the initial phase, and this influenced the decision as to which schools to approach.

However, it quickly transpired that interest in the research was very low. Only three head teachers subsequently agreed to volunteer the time and data. A further two schools were later sought through personal contacts with the schools representative of the local branch of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB). This raises an (inevitable) area of concern. It can be argued that given the sector-specificity of the research, the acceptance of participation on the research project could result in bias in the positive direction towards the construction industry. Indeed, as the findings unfold, the views of the careers advisers interviewed of the construction industry are somewhat sanguine. However, this is always an issue with research of this nature; it is maintained that the benefits of collecting rich data for the purpose exploring careers advice in schools outweigh the pitfalls of such bias.

Eventually, five schools participated in the exploratory interviews and the research team gained access to careers advisers in the schools. It is useful to point out that, where possible, the definition of "careers adviser" adopted by the research team was broadened to include Science/Mathematics teachers who were deemed to be relevant to the construction industry and Connexions advisers. Table 1 below provides a profile of the eight interviewees involved in this phase. A semi-structured interviewing approach was adopted in all cases. This allows a certain degree of flexibility to the research team, yet enabling the interview process to fit the time

constraints often encountered in such research technique (Silverman, 2000). Questions revolved around three main issues: first the personal background information was ascertained to create a rapport with the interviewee and to establish potential connection with the construction industry; second, the process of giving and receiving careers advice in schools was elucidated; finally, the interviewees' perceptions of the construction industry were elicited. Each interview lasted between one to two hours; the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim to aid analysis. The findings are discussed in the next section.

**Table 1:** Profile of interviewees.

Participant	Role	Experience in education	School	Type of school
A	Director of work-related learning	10 years	1	Comprehensive; mixed
B	Work-related learning officer	3 years		
C	Science teacher	2 years		
D	Careers adviser	33 years	2	State (Catholic); all boys
E	Careers coordinator	20 years	3	State (Catholic); all girls
F	Head of Personal/Social Education	30 years	4	Technology college; mixed
G	Connexions adviser	10 years		
H	Careers mentor	26 years	5	Technology college; mixed

## EMERGENT FINDINGS

This section will discuss the key findings in relation to the personal background of the interviewees, the process of giving and receiving careers advice in schools, and the interviewees' perceptions of the construction industry.

### Personal background

From Table 1 above, it can be seen that six out of the eight interviewees can be considered to possess extensive experience in the education sector, with specific experience in offering careers advice in schools. The average experience is 16.75 years. The job role description emanated from the terms of the interviewees; it is therefore evident that the role of careers advisers is somewhat diffused (Morris *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, Participant H commented that her head of department has a remit that covers:

*"[...] careers, some work-related, also citizenship and personal development and sexual health."*

It appears that the job description of careers advisers today is expanded to include contemporary government policies of personal development, work-based learning, employability, and in some cases, even sexual and health education. Alongside the diversity of the role, there is also the issue of increasing work intensity and isolation for the careers advisers concerned. In all of the five schools interviewed, careers advice is provided by small teams of advisers (usually three or four) meeting the demands of the school pupils and the variety of potential industry sectors. Especially for Participants F and G, support is not genuinely given as they feel increasingly sidelined by the Head Teacher, who "banished them to the first floor", away from normal student flow.

It is therefore fair to say that meeting the demands and covering all the relevant industrial sectors is no mean feat. One could speculate from our small response rate that construction perhaps did not feature strongly in the non-respondents' schools. Indeed, it was found that the passion from the careers advisers interviewed about the construction industry derived largely from either personal relations/introductions or on regional contractors who comes forward. Participant E, for instance, describes her love for bridge construction from her childhood days and shares this zeal with her engineer husband. In terms of industrial connection, this appears to be few and far between, as Participant D indicated:

*"[...] we do have a link with Northeast Housing Group, but that's the only group at the minute that we have a formal link with. Northeast in fact last year, we had, we participated in a pilot, where we had a young apprentice working with the housing group [...] so we're kind of working together with them to develop that system. What you need to be aware of [...] is that although the construction industry says that they are crying out for people [...] until the last three or four years, there has been almost no real contact with schools [...] the result of that is that we have got a lot of lads interested, but not all of them can get apprenticeships."*

All the careers advisers have, nonetheless, reported that they have at least been introduced to the construction industry and the diversity of its craft and professional work through induction sessions of various kinds with the CITB.

### **Process of giving and receiving careers advice in schools**

In terms of the process of giving and receiving careers advice in schools, the main issues that emerged from the interviews involved the types of contact available to school pupils and the encouragement given to pupils regarding construction careers. To focus the discussion further, for relevance to the construction sector, the interviews naturally centred upon two year groups – year 10 and year 11 pupils. Year 10 pupils are pertinent in the interviews because of the preparation for the week-long work placement, which will offer the earliest formal introduction into the world of work. On the other hand, year 11 pupils are prospective school leavers, where career decisions become more of a priority for students.

A range of typical contact opportunities can be elicited from the interviewees. Careers advice is usually provided in time-tabled sessions and one-to-one appointments. The following excerpt from Participant H sums it up:

*"The year 10 have four lessons, or is it five? I can't remember. In year 10 each class would have five, it's just the way it's timetabled really. In year 11 it's a similar number. So in year 10 they do what's called the real game [a game that provides insights into career, job and occupational roles], which some other schools do which is careers and covers other things as well. And in year 11 they do careers related stuff as well, but a lot of it is more focussed on the one-to-one support in year 11 really."*

Participant E follows a similar process, although the "real game" exercise for School 5 is a "stereotyping exercise" for School 3, where the pupils are introduced to non-traditional industries for girls like construction and engineering. All participants acknowledge the existence of a curriculum that incorporates careers guidance; however, the delivery is up to the school's own discretion. Participant D illustrates:

*“There is a variety of ways in which advice is given. I mean you have got to remember that careers education guidance is delivered across the curriculum. So at key stage three and four, there is a national curriculum requirement now. In this place, it’s built in through the PDE (Personal Development Programme) which is what used to be Personal Social Health, Citizenship and Careers education.”*

Again, this highlights the dilution of emphasis on careers guidance. Such dilution is also shown in the amount of time spent on one-to-one sessions. Unanimously, all interviewees suggested an average of 10 to 15 minutes to discuss career options. Arguably, this is insufficient for providing adequate advice. However, with limited resources devoted to careers advice, services have to invariably be streamlined, as Participant H notes,

*“[...] we plotted who looked as if they would need more support [...] who weren’t sure, who needed more information before they were ready. Because I knew the students we did it together and plotted who needed what and who was going to be seen by whom.”*

Still, it was observed that resources in terms of information are not lacking in all cases. When asked about the careers advice process, every interviewee was quick to show the research team various files of procedural information. It is maintained that the high level of bureaucracy is actually taking time out from one-to-one guidance. The level of paper-based information is also found in the ‘guidance’ offered to students. There is no shortage of published literature about a variety of industrial sectors and career paths available. However, the problem lies in the fact that the students have to first identify the need to look for sector-specific literature, and more importantly, that reading published information is the most effective way of providing guidance! This, it is argued, is suspect. However, careers advisers tend to adopt an arm-length approach to offering advice, as Participant A offers this typical response:

*“I would say that they get broad advice, you know, they have to make up their own minds as to what they want to do [...] I wouldn’t push them into something.”*

The week-long work placement and employer presentations also came up as opportunities for pupils to seek information about industrial sectors. However, invoking an earlier argument, there is often a mismatch between the supply and demand of placements. For example, Participant E, who is also connected with School 2, found at one time a high interest in the plumbing trade. However, there were no placement opportunities with local employers, and more crucially, the interested pupils could not subsequently find a place at the further education college because plumbing was over-subscribed. Nonetheless, Participant E noted that some of the pupils eventually went into another trade e.g. bricklaying instead, which still benefited the construction industry.

On the issue of further education, the interviewees conceded that there was a subtle encouragement of students to perform well academically and stay on in education. The pressure exerted by the government’s policy on higher education participation appears to manifest in the careers guidance provided in schools. Participant D, for example, reflected:

*“We certainly make them aware of what further education, full-time further education, is available.”*

Participant A is more forthright:

*“There is a sixth form school, and some kids, it would actually be more beneficial for them to go to the sixth form school than it would be for them to go [vocational further education college].”*

Indeed, the preference of academic education over vocational education is evident from the exploratory interviews. It is noted that the encouragement towards pupils pursuing A levels emanate from the government’s dictum on higher education participation, whereas the role of vocational education is diminished. According to the interviewees of schools 1 to 3, vocational subjects are offered in the school’s curriculum as a means of providing opportunity, usually for the “academically-challenged”.

### **Perceptions of the construction industry**

On a more optimistic note, there were many positive comments about the construction industry, with Participant H acknowledging its contribution to the forthcoming development of the Olympics site. Participant H even suggested that she would treat advising a girl the same way as she would advise a boy who is considering a career in construction, suggesting that improvements are being made to correct the gender balance in the provision of careers advice (Women and Work Commission, 2006):

*“[...] I would treat a meeting with a young girl who is interested in the construction industry, exactly the same as I would with a boy. There’s certainly no bias. I think that there is a push to encourage more girls, not just to construction, but to traditionally sort of male careers [...] I would definitely, definitely encourage it, as long as they had the information and determination.”*

Another perhaps less positive comment came from Participant D:

*“[...] you can certainly make lots of money [...] Because you have all these scam merchants on watchdog or rogue traders charging six hundred pounds for ten minutes’ work, the kids will see this and think, “six hundred pounds for ten minutes work, I’ll have some of that”. Plus on telly they keep saying about not being able to get a plumber for love nor money.”*

Indeed, the participants recognise the problem with attracting youngsters into construction, with Participant A reiterating:

*“But if you’re a young person right, and you look at what is being thrown at you, its pop star wages and pop star style, and it doesn’t come out in the industry, you know, to get dirty, get your gear covered in dirt.”*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

At first glance, the negative perceptions of the industry appear to be changing, albeit slowly. The industry is perceived by the careers advisers interviewed as an industry that offers immense opportunities and one that is growing in diversity. However, the views presented here cannot be taken as representative since, as previously discussed, the participation of the interviewees in this study suggest a particular positive bias towards the industry. Still, the study makes some interesting revelations that can have implications for both careers advisers and industry. First, a high degree of voluntarism characterises the careers advice process in schools, with careers advisers empowering pupils to rely on their ‘better’ judgement. The assumption that pupils know what

sectors to go into, find the relevant information and subsequently read the information needs to be revisited. Second, employers need to be more forthcoming in forging links with schools to ensure greater alignment between supply and demand of placement opportunities and even apprenticeships. This is best done at the regional and even local level. Finally, it would be beneficial to replicate the study over time to identify changes in perceptions. Indeed, evidence from this exploratory phase suggests that perceptions are changing for the better; and in some areas, e.g. the expectations of a high wage, perhaps inaccurately!

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