

# EXPLORING PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES AND THE EFFECTS ON THE CONSTRUCTION WORKFORCE: A SCOTLAND STUDY

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The construction industry, particularly the public sector, plays an important role in providing infrastructure, assets and services that improve the social and economic status of any country. The delivery of public construction projects in the UK and Scotland have since moved beyond the traditional form of exclusive project execution by the public sector to different forms of public-private partnerships. While this approach offers numerous benefits, the challenges remain. This research highlights the challenges of implementing public-private partnerships in public construction procurement in Scotland particularly as it affects human resource motivation and performance in Scottish public construction projects. The emphases on human resource motivation and performance is crucially expressed in this paper. This is stimulated by literature emphasising the significant human resource dependent nature of the construction industry. Adopting an exploratory and interpretivist approach, fifteen purposively sampled participants provided relevant experiences via semi-structured interviews, with transcripts thematically analysed. The themes presented in this paper cover leadership and goal uncertainty, occupational rigidity and public client penalty orientation. This paper also reiterates the influence of external political factors on the construction industry and the importance of decision-making driven by the construction management processes and parties.

Keywords: HRM, public-private partnerships, procurement, public sector, Scotland

## INTRODUCTION

The public sector plays an important role in the socio-economic wellbeing of nations (Loader 2007; Reis and Cabral 2015) but specifically in the procurement and management of national infrastructure and assets (Jacobson and Choi 2008; Hartmann *et al.*, 2010). The procurement of construction products and services is vital to the United Kingdom social and economic prosperity. The construction industry in the UK produces over £110 billion per annum and contributes 7% of GDP to the economy; a quarter of this output is public sector driven (Designing Buildings 2017). The construction procurement practice in the UK is perceived as an example for developing countries and economies to adopt for public sector and international procurement (Loader 2007). The successful execution of public procurement in the UK is dependent on the involvement of private sector consultants, contractors and financial institutions (Almarri and Abu-Hijleh 2017). This process allegedly replaces

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a traditional form of public construction procurement based on the sole project execution and delivery by the national and local public authorities (Li *et al.*, 2005). The delivery of public construction projects with the use of public and private sector collaborations has become common across the construction industry (Hartmann *et al.*, 2010; Furneaux and Barraket 2014). Attempts to execute public construction procurement in isolation have become prone to struggle. The increased adoption of this procurement approach has arguably been a result of the perceived benefits of innovation, efficiency, quality, finance and risk sharing to the construction project and the built asset (Li *et al.*, 2005; Almarri and Abu-Hijleh 2017). This has further ensured that that partnerships are, almost by default, initiated and sustained by all parties involved in public construction projects (Pelkonen and Valovirta 2015) without bearing in mind a detailed recognition and awareness of any negative impact. This novel approach, in spite of the intended benefits, does not guarantee a higher likelihood of project delivery or improved construction processes when compared to the traditional approach it succeeds (Jacobson and Choi 2008). This paper emphasises this argument particularly as it relates to human resource experiences on motivation and performance in Scotland.

### **Public Sector Construction Procurement in Scotland**

The construction industry in Scotland delivers £21.4 billion per annum, accounting for 9% of Scotland's GDP, with over 60% of turnover originating from the public sector (Scottish Enterprise 2017). In the quest to further deliver value for money and other benefits of public-private partnerships employed in public construction procurement, the Scottish government established the Scottish Futures Trust to independently work with both the public and private sectors to deliver public sector construction projects (Scottish Futures Trust 2017a). This goal is directly being delivered by a subset of SFTbuild called the Hub. The Hub programme operates with the collaboration of public and private organisations to deliver and manage assets more effectively, improve value for money and measure results through detailed key performance indicators (Scottish Futures Trust 2017b).

This paper also attempts to reiterate a distinct understanding on Scotland and her public construction procurement. The argument for an independent understanding of Scotland's public procurement environment is reiterated by the significant focus on a generalised UK or mainly England representation in research on public procurement (Li *et al.*, 2005) and therefore, a distinct representation for Scotland in construction management research is needed. Similarly, Hood and McGarvey (2002) argued that although the involvement of the private sector in public construction projects is widely accepted in the UK, the response from Scotland has been of reluctant tolerance.

An explanation for this may exist in an assertion by Hood and McGarvey (2002) that the introduction of private sector participation in public construction projects in Scotland is not seen as a construction management decision but represented a political statement by the then labour government in Scotland. This scenario is however played again when the then new SNP government took over power and introduced its own procurement policy in the form of Hub. The need for construction management research to identify and analyse research that recognise a Scottish understanding outside a generalised UK knowledge is also reverberated in Cameron *et al.*, (2008) research that presented evidence of a distinct health and safety knowledge in Scotland when compared to the UK. Similarly, Ankrah *et al.*, (2009) identified a significant

difference in project orientation between Scotland, in the northern part of the United Kingdom, and the southern parts of the United Kingdom.

While the emphasis on the success of public-private partnership in the United Kingdom as a whole and in Scotland particularly persists, the attention towards the challenges experienced by the human resources and the resultant effects within and without these projects remain lacking (Hood and McGarvey 2002). Existing knowledge rightly emphasise the delivery of financial, time, cost, quality and risk management

The human resource involvement in the delivery of public procurement goals is crucial; the significant dependence of construction projects on the human resource attests to this (Grebler and Burns 1982; Nguyen and Hadikusumo 2017). This research draws on Fryer *et al.*, (2004) factors of human resource performance to include ability and skill, motivation, feedback, role clarity, technologies, task, environment and so on. These also inform the analyses and discussions on the research findings. This research aims to explore the human resource experiences of detrimental public-private partnership procurement practices and its effects on human resource performance to deliver Scottish public sector construction projects. This research analyses the lived experiences of construction professional involved in public sector construction projects in Scotland and how these experiences affect their motivational and performance wellbeing.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTION**

The need to access human experiences in real-world occupational practice in this research informed the adoption of an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism stipulates that reality and truth does not exist independently in nature but in the social constructions of individuals who experience the world (Fellows and Liu 2008). The interpretive paradigm is largely valuable in management and social research where truth and reality is constructed by individuals involved (Creswell 2013). Although the use of semi-structured interviews in construction management research is not uncommon, the significant use of quantitative surveys limits the availability of literature and knowledge derived from rich in-depth individual experiences (Agapiou 2002). The challenge of ensuring that respondents are purposively sampled further limits the wealth of knowledge derivable from quantitative research. This study adopts a purposive sampling technique to engage individuals with relevant experience in public-private partnerships in Scottish public sector construction procurement (Fellows and Liu 2008; Khan 2014).

Initial communications with potential participants were made via the contact details provided on webpages of the 32 Scottish local authorities with five contacts agreeing to participate. The resulting contact details of interested private sector parties were also utilised to secure private sector participation. The individuals were interviewed face-to-face for an average of one hour, based on a semi-structured interview protocol, with conversations audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for thematic analyses. The choice of semi-structured interviews as the data collection method is also in line with the exploratory and interpretivist nature of this research to provide further understanding of the research subject (Agapiou 2002; Brinkmann 2008). The presence of open-ended questions enables participants to express the more important experiences on a research subject (Jacobson and Choi 2008). These interviews followed ethical guidelines of seeking informed consent for research respondents, assuring and ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality (Preissle 2008).

The interview protocol contained closed and open-ended questions on individual demographic and career details, public construction project goals identification and delivery strategies, characteristics and challenges of public-private partnerships in Scotland, the impacts of these challenges on the human resource wellbeing and recommendations to effectively manage these challenges. Table 1 provides anonymised names and occupational information about the 15 research respondents who participated in this interpretive exploration. The use of pseudo names for the respondents is in the line with ethical practice in research (Khan, 2014).

Table 1: Respondents details and roles

Name	Age Group	Occupational Role	Employer	Years of Experience
Kennedy	22-34 Years	Construction Manager	Public/Private Initiative	13-18 Years
Gabriel	35-44 Years	Construction Manager	Private Organisation	19-24 Years
Tracy	35-44 Years	Quantity Surveyor	Private Organisation	13-18 Years
Mark	35-44 Years	Construction Manager	Local Council	30 Years and above
Vince	45-54 Years	Construction and Project Manager	Local Council	30 Years and above
Clarkson	35-44 Years	Development Manager	Local Council	0-2 Years
Sasha	45-54 Years	Project Consultant	Private Organisation	8-12 Years
Donald	45-54 Years	Project Consultant	Private Organisation	30 Years and above
Simon	35-44 Years	Project Manager	Private Organisation	8-12 Years
Daniel	45-54 Years	Project Manager	Local Council	25-30 Years
Craig	45-54 Years	Project Manager	Local Council	25-30 Years
Clarence	45-54 Years	Client	Local Council	25-30 Years
Hammond	35-44 Years	Client, Project Manager	Local Council	25-30 Years
William	35-44 Years	Service Manager	Local Council	25-30 Years
John	35-44 Years	Project Director	Private Organisation	30 Years and above

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are derived from a thematic analysis and coding of the transcribed interviews into nodes using the Nvivo10 software. This approach is recognised and relevant in construction management research (Agapiou 2002; Ankrah *et al.*, 2009)

### Leadership and Goal Uncertainties

The public sector, seen as the client and sponsor of public construction projects, is expected to provide clearly expressed identity and cultural expectation in terms of the projects goals and desired process to be adopted in public-private partnerships. The respondents' experiences and perceptions indicated an absence of clear goal and objective direction. This perception, as it stems from private sector individuals, provides relational challenges amongst public and private parties on a larger scale.

...Public sector clients should be more specific about what they want and avoid changes during the construction project... The less changes, the better... [Gabriel].

...We've got multiple parties feeding into hub whether it's Scottish Futures Trust, the Scottish government, the councils themselves, so there's very limited scope for us to be able to bring in new thinking... [Kennedy].

In agreement with the respondents, it is important for project goals and individual responsibilities to be clearly stated (Fryer *et al.*, 2004; Jacobson and Choi 2008), however the objection towards change expressed by private sector employees is debatable. The construction industry constantly experiences changes and the ability to adapt to change for project delivery to be achieved is crucial. This may reflect an absence or shortage of training and development for the construction workforce on change management in public construction projects. These discussions further inform

the rigid procurement approaches experienced by the respondents in the third theme of this section.

As expressed by Kennedy, the success of the public sector to simultaneously consider government, public institutions, local councils and political representation and needs presents a difficulty in deciding what leadership and vision is identified and shared within the project environment. Local councils, beyond being service providers, hold the crucial leadership position for championing a shared vision, developing beneficial partnerships and supporting the attainment of socio-economic goals (Hood and McGarvey 2002). This situation becomes increasingly exasperating with the higher shares being held by private sector organisations in the SFT/Hub structure, that is, 60% to the private sector, 30% to public sector participants and 10% to the Scottish Futures Trust (Scottish Futures Trust 2014).

The integration of private sector organisations into public sector projects allows the dominance of private sector culture and practices (Hartmann *et al.*, 2010). Hood and Garvey (2002) argued that the practices within public construction project extinguish any distinction between private and public sectors, furthering the absence of any clear public sector identity and culture when interacting with other parties. In addition, Yuan *et al.*, (2010) argued that the private sector is the most important decision maker in public construction projects. This provides significant levels of conflict of interests. Public sector organisations possess different learning journeys and viewpoints on public procurement (Furieux and Barraket 2014) and should address the resulting differences in order to maximise the benefits of their relationships with the private sector (Hartmann *et al.*, 2010).

...long and short of it if a political realm came and it didn't want to use the Scottish Future Trust module anymore, they would disband it... at that stage, I think hub would evolve into something else; another procurement method... [Kennedy].

The leadership and vision conflicts are further enhanced from a political standpoint. The identity of Scotland and her construction industry remains vague as Scotland is argued to be dependent on and reactive to the UK government policy and therefore falls short of the leadership required to meet her own unique needs in public construction projects (Agapiou 2002). This research also recognises the history and influence of politics over the construction industry in Scotland as an important driver to attract either positive or negative results from public construction projects.

The subject of politics in public construction procurement, with recent socio-political events such as the exit of the UK from the EU, uncertainties on power devolution and the likely occurrence of a second referendum vote for Scotland within the space of 5 years, presents the possibility of further negative effects. As the literature provides evidence of the origin of public-private partnerships as a political process reluctantly tolerated in Scotland, the influence of politics and the resulting uncertainties endure through the various governments in power. While the importance of political support to the delivery of construction project goals is valid (Jacobson and Choi 2008), this support seems biased and unstable. Rightly, Pinto and Prescott (1988) stressed the need for management support in construction projects to be prioritised and enhanced.

### **Occupational Rigidity**

In the quest to improve value for money and the standard of construction project delivery, the public sector 'best practice' approach specifies the contribution of community benefits as a pre-requisite to private sector participation in public sector

construction procurement. Private sector respondents reveal the effects on productivity and performance in;

...Community benefit schemes have also been a pain in the neck... Community benefits can be a distraction from the real project as it takes time away from the job ... [Gabriel].

The experience of community benefits as a burden is evidence to the disconnect of the tendering and contracting processes from human resource consultations in this crucial stage (Li *et al.*, 2005). This may also represent an absence of workforce engagement in the policy making process: this is not uncommon in construction projects (Abu-Hijleh and Ibbs 1989). The opposite of this would guarantee improved project performance and delivery (Suprpto *et al.*, 2016).

This rigid approach is also reflected in the limited autonomy level available to the human resource within public construction projects;

... my frame of reference is very contractual and restricted to have to work within the parameters of that contract... within my frame of references looking at construction management, my abilities are quite constrained because I have a contract... [Kennedy].

While most contracts are set up to deal with numerous items such as integration (Ankrah *et al.*, 2009), these contracts largely do not address human resource factors such as autonomy. This places a restriction on the ability of construction professionals to competently manage public construction projects to successful completion. Autonomy for the human resource is considered an important element for optimal human resource motivation and performance (Adedokun *et al.*, 2013). It is important that individuals are involved in creating an organisational culture that empowers professionals to independently and confidently manage projects in line with laid down innovation guidelines (Almarri and Abu-Hijleh 2017). Hood and McGarvey (2002) reiterated the need for individual skills and competencies to be recognised and enhanced for the benefits of public and private sector relationships to be optimised.

I think the public sector, it's a bit more constrained...we have a central procurement unit...they procure everything from pencils to the cubies...the people here are kind of experts purely in procurement, procurement law...everything including motorways and huge developments goes through the CPU...it's just another complication from our perspective that doesn't actually make things any better, in fact it makes things worse...it just makes the timescales much longer...it kind of gets in the way of communication...that is demotivating...our procurement system in recent years is more kind of annoying [Clarence].

The profession of individuals in control influences the orientation of the project (Ankrah *et al.*, 2009), this may provide explanation for the orientation in these projects as procurement managers hold significant decision making powers. The responses shown above question the supposed benefits of these partnerships such as improvements to the public procurement systems (Yuan *et al.*, 2010). This argument also offers evidence into the effects of these challenges on the motivation and performances of the human resources in these construction projects. The Public procurement is argued to thrive on the collaboration between public and private parties and employee engagement within a conducive and mutual working environment; however, this is not reflected in these responses. Communication and consultation is a key human resource management tool, this is much more important when considering construction project delivery (Pinto and Prescott, 1988).

## Public Client Penalty Orientation

Literature suggests that public and private sector relationships should be both contractual and relational, however evidence from this research suggests that public-private partnerships are penalty focused and avenues for rewards to foster positive partnerships are limited. The negative effects of an emphasis on penalties, even in recent procurement initiatives such as Hub, are evident in the responses of the research participants.

...my incentives really come from the stick effect of the carrot... I have to use that to say sorry you're not on time, you're not on budget. I will step in here and charge you early day damages... [Kennedy].

...public sector projects are more penalties driven... [Gabriel].

This approach, either for reason of risk management or contract management, leaves a negative effect on the relationship between parties and eventually affects the procurement process negatively;

...contractors get upset when you hit them with early damage ... they take it quite personally...it's always about punishing... [Sasha].

The traditional penalty orientation in the construction industry, despite research arguing against it, persists at the expense of the human resource. These challenges seem identifiable with construction professionals across the globe and therefore may be linked to the rigid and traditional nature of construction projects (Cheng and Ma 2013). Although it is argued that an increase in client influence results in an increase in workforce representation (Yuan *et al.*, 2010), this is not reflected in the participants' responses.

This situation is blamed on an emphasis on cost. The emphasis on cost erodes human resource recognition. This provides evidence of retrogression into traditional cost and finance orientation. These encourage further reservations on the benefits of public-private partnerships in public construction procurement. For construction project delivery to be achieved, the cultures within these projects should be considered. The culture experienced in construction projects is shown in the relationships between participants, individual attitudes and the conditions on site. Construction cultures have been characterised by division, antagonism, suspicion, poor communication, finger-pointing, machismo and sexism, further reiterating the need for cultural change in the construction industry (Ankrah *et al.*, 2009). While these are prevalent in public construction procurement, public organisations are keen to present their efforts in limiting the tense events of awarding penalties;

...We give contractors the opportunity to make things right; this is important. Things happen but we work together to make it work out well. We have a quality audit system that allows us to complete contractor appraisals and if standards are dropped, this is reported and the contractor is then asked to provide an explanation and an improvement plan to prevent further re-occurrences... They know we don't accept substandard work and if they don't do a good job we will tell them it is not good enough and when the bad work continues, we tell them it can't go on... [Vince].

The data presented are in contrast to the concept of collaboration between public and private parties in public procurement. The project's approach to preventing project failure or shortcomings, by stipulating penalties, may be because of numerous factors, which further research should seek to identify and understand.

## CONCLUSION

Public procurement is distinguished in its role to provide national assets and infrastructure and deliver valuable services to a variety of customers. While the partnerships between public and private parties are argued provide numerous benefits, the perceived disadvantages and challenges have not been scarce. While this is not surprising, it is necessary for further understanding of these challenges and the drivers of these challenges to be derived. The peculiarity of Scotland and the need for a distinct understanding on Scotland, as argued in this paper, also makes this research more interesting. More specifically, this research focuses on human resource interests and how the procurement practices within these partnerships affect the wellbeing and performance of the construction workforce in achieving personal and project delivery. This research aimed to explore the challenges in Scottish public sector construction projects and the effects on human resource performance by drawing on the experiences of purposively sampled individuals from Scottish local authorities and private sector partners. These challenges and experiences have been engaged and analysed based on human resource management principles and practices proffered in literature.

The collected interview data provided themes of the challenges faced by various parties. From the data collected, the identified challenges presented in this paper were largely expressed by private sector participants. The themes presented in this paper cover uncertainties in organisational identity and culture, political instabilities, occupational rigidity and limitations and the persistence of a penalty driven relationship between public and private parties within public construction projects. While some sections of these findings may be present in the construction management literature, the concentration on public-private partnerships in public sector construction projects in Scotland is a significant contribution for providing further understanding on the operation of such partnerships based on political manifestos without it being engaged with the construction management process and parties.

The importance of cordial and symbiotic relationships between private and public parties within public sector construction procurement is also undermined by the problematic approach of adopting penalty focused terms in public contracts. The perceived absence of project identity and public leadership in the Scottish context reinforces the need for further research in other construction management segments distinctively for Scotland. These findings and discussions reinforce the reservations expressed towards the proposed and perceived benefits of public-private partnerships, specifically in this paper, with regards to the human resources in Scottish public construction procurement.

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