



DISRUPTIVE INFLUENCE

FIS Skills is on a mission – to bring about a dynamic, collaborative change to training that connects employers, colleges and local authorities to overcome the skills crisis. We find out how it’s been shaking things up

There’s been plenty of discussion about a skills crisis in recent years, and FIS’s Training Needs Analysis last year only added to the volume. It highlighted growing concern among its members about an ageing workforce that’s not being replaced quickly enough by a new generation of workers.

The challenge now is to turn this talk into action. The pressure is on to raise the profile of construction at schools and in colleges, to make it an attractive career prospect for

young people and job hunters to get into – and stay in.

Following a 10-month application process, FIS secured £2.1m CITB funding in October to really get to grips with the problem.

To start with, the association is using the funds to roll out its BuildBack scheme, which was launched earlier this year to help jobseekers into a drylining career. It’s also focusing on promoting the sector more vigorously among colleges of further education and employers.

BuildBack

BuildBack was launched earlier this year in north-east England with two cohorts of 10 trainees (see *FIS Focus* June 2017). Participants took part in two weeks of training at Tyne Metropolitan College to learn the skills and competencies for installing drylining, followed by a two-week work placement on site with a local employer.

Of these, four participants were offered jobs as a direct result of this pilot programme.

“Two others got jobs elsewhere,” says FIS Skills project manager Paul Glover, “but both of them said BuildBack gave them a feeling of self-worth and confidence, which they believed helped them secure employment.”

The CITB money means this positive start can be taken forward to other parts of the UK. Glover is working with existing FIS-approved colleges up and down the country to set up new cohorts, as well as signing up additional colleges and engaging with local employers. And he’s expanding the training offer to cover all aspects of fit-out, not just drylining.

Two new cohorts of 10 are expected to begin training this month – one in Sussex, another in Hampshire – and there may well be more.

Construction firm Astins, which already has its own training academy, has hooked up with FIS to begin a new round of BuildBack training in November.

Astins HR and training manager Rebecca Hislam says: “The big thing is, it’s a coordinated effort, which gives job hunters more widespread opportunities in many different fields. We’re really pleased to take part in BuildBack – it gives us access to really good people, and it shows that drylining involves serious skill and training.”



Spreading the word

Engagement in training has long been a problem within the sector. Main contractors and housebuilders are legally obliged to recruit apprentices and retrain, but this requirement inevitably gets passed on, and watered down, through the supply chain. This leaves a typical FIS member with the problem of delivering and evidencing adherence to these requirements.

“Contractors won’t train; they subcontract,” says FIS Skills delivery director Helen Yeulet. “And workers only train to get a CSCS card to get on site, not because they want to learn.”

FIS’s training survey earlier this year showed that two-thirds of FE college students don’t end up in construction and are not seen as ‘site ready’ – although four weeks’ work vastly increases their job prospects.

“Fix this and the skills shortage issue in the industry almost vanishes,” says Yeulet.

Part of the problem is that the processes by which employers offer on-site work experience are prohibitive, involving health and safety concerns as well as legal checks for mentoring those aged under-18. “It all appears like too much paperwork for very little return,” says Yeulet. “Yet employers won’t employ them straight from college as they aren’t site ready.”

So FIS acts as the enabler – smoothing the process for employers to train and matching them with trainees by working with approved training providers and FE colleges. It’s a list that spans more and more of the UK:

- **Newcastle** – Tyne Metropolitan College
- **Yorkshire** – Barnsley College Construction Centre; Sheffield College



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- **Hampshire** – Basingstoke College of Technology
- **West Sussex** – Chichester College
- **London** – South East Colleges; Barking & Dagenham College
- **Wales** – Neath and Port Talbot College (NPTC) Group of Colleges.

And several other colleges are in the process of signing up with FIS, including Manchester College, South Lanarkshire College, and Wigan and Leigh College.

The new CITB funding will be used to spread the FIS message around FE colleges, local authorities and employers across the country.

FIS will outline the breadth of trade options available, and help FE colleges match their courses to local industry requirements. For example, says Yeulet: “Too many trainees are put on plastering courses, but drylining is the greater need.”

The association will also link employers with colleges to provide local on-site work experience and direct training. And it will attract new entrants into the sector via programmes designed to prove that decent training results in a well-paid job.

Wyn Pritchard, who oversees the NPTC Group of Colleges in Wales, is FIS’s key partner in the principality. “Working with employers and the sector is key to delivering the skills and experience demanded by the industry,” he says. “The approach by FIS can only enhance the image, skills development and apprentices needed at this crucial time.”

“In Wales, we have a devolved skills agenda through the Welsh government, which presents opportunities for the partnership to develop new approaches and solutions, something we are already discussing with FIS. It is an exciting time for us both and the sector.”

Action on CRO cards

FIS is bidding for a further £500,000 of CITB funding to tackle another impending crisis – the phasing out of CRO cards over the next five years.

Construction Related Occupation (CRO) cards have until now been available to people working in trades not covered by Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards – taping and jointing, for example – to get them on site to work. But as of April, CSCS ceased issuing these cards and will not be renewing them. The focus now – especially in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire – is on giving every construction worker a virtual, updatable passport setting out their qualifications and competencies.

“Having all construction workers equipped with the right card in the right place and time has never been more important,” says FIS’s Helen Yeulet. “We want LOSCs to be

knowledgeable about specified products, and for evidence of this to be on their virtual passport.”

But while the long-term aim is clearly positive, in the short term the interiors sector will be badly hit by the withdrawal of CRO cards. Over the next five years, some 86,000 workers will be affected, leaving thousands of labour-only subcontractors to pay their own way to an NVQ Level 2 to back get on site – at a cost of about £900 each.

FIS is in early discussions with CITB on ways to help LOSCs meet the cost of this training. But in the meantime, its focus is on attracting qualified assessors into the sector to handle the surge in training this will eventually bring.

“The fundamental problem is money,” says Glover. “You can earn a lot more money working on site as a dryliner than as an assessor.”

The key message from FIS is that being an



assessor is a positive career move, particularly for older professionals or those with children who’d prefer a more flexible work schedule.

And, given how much expertise is lost as older workers leave construction for less physically demanding jobs, by expanding the assessor network, FIS stands to improve the sector’s career profile and its pipeline of knowledge.