



# Getting to the source of the skills shortage

A White Paper by John Rowan and Partners

# FOREWORD

For over 30 years we have known the secret to success at John Rowan and Partners and it's something I don't mind sharing with you, as its fairly simple. The secret to our success has been our people and as much as this sounds like a fanciful PR statement it is true.

We are only as good as the consultants who work with our clients. By attracting, training, investing in and retaining the best people in the industry, we have continued to grow.

Now in our 34th year, we have been through three cycles of recession and seen high levels of graduate unemployment quickly followed by periods of growth and the inevitable skills shortage. Back in 2009 we developed The Pledge initiative to encourage companies to take on paid internships through the Government's Graduate Talent Pool.

It is thought we lost around 200,000 people from the construction industry in the last recession and The Pledge was created to halt the flow of graduates leaving the industry in search of jobs in other sectors.

Now seven years on it is a very different picture and according to the latest Construction Skills Network Forecasts 2016 – 2020 report, the output of the UK construction industry is projected to expand at an annual average rate of 2.5% over the 2016 to 2020 period. This is of course good news however, the report also shows that with it comes the inevitable challenge of recruiting an additional 230,000 new workers in the next few years.

The construction professions are already suffering due to a lack of graduates entering the industry and without action it won't be long until this latest skills shortage threatens to impact on the growth of our sector.

## Heading to the source of the issue...

Over the past eight months we have undertaken a piece of in-depth research to try and better understand attitudes of undergraduates towards the construction sector and their future careers in the construction professions. We are all aware that there is a shortage of talent in the construction sector and we wanted to ask the sector's youngest new recruits where they think the problem lies.

Before we started the research we identified four main objectives which we wanted to look into, these were:

1. To identify what the barriers are to a career in construction
2. To gain better insight into how the construction industry is perceived
3. To determine what undergraduates want from their careers
4. To understand what undergraduates want from their future employers

This survey highlights industry issues and trends, however it does have limitations as it is a relatively small sample size. The research involved 40 participants and was conducted with construction undergraduates on degree courses in Quantity Surveying, Building Surveying, Project Management and Construction Management and involved students from Reading, Kingston, Loughborough and Nottingham Trent University.

Some of the trends highlighted by the research, mirror what we already know as an industry, but it also offers new and compelling insight into how we can attract more people into the sector. It is clear that while our construction industry has many organisations doing great works to provide resources and information to schools, our education system still lacks an awareness and understanding of the opportunities that the UK construction industry has to offer.

Further research into the trends raised in this report would be

useful to determine the extent of the issue. It is however clear, that if we don't act as an industry and promote our sector to the education system we will continue to suffer from an industry wide skills shortage.



**Stephen Gee**

Managing Partner  
John Rowan and Partners



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The issue the sector has to solve is how to get children asking the questions in the first place.



## How can the sector attract more construction professionals?

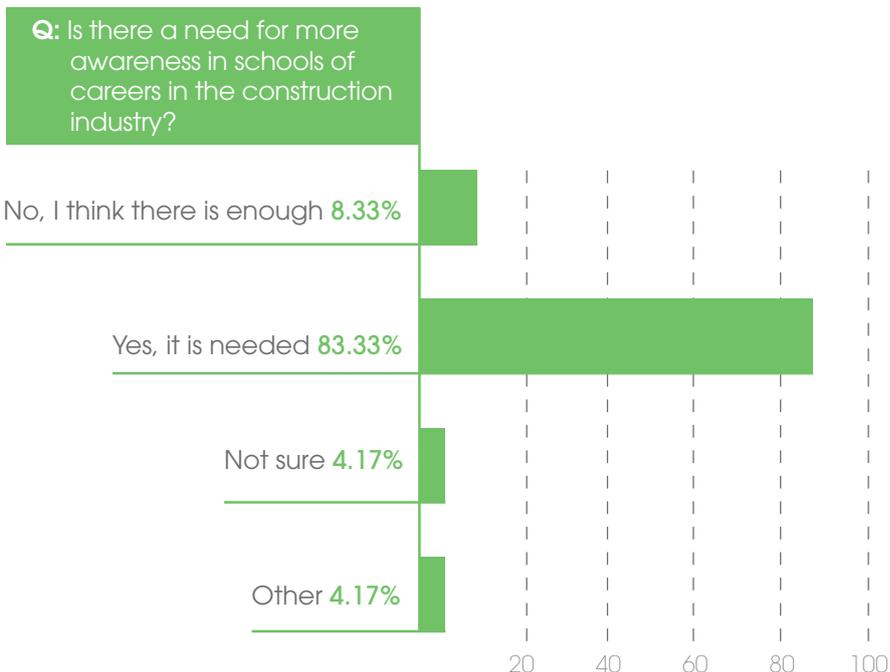
There is a real lack of awareness and understanding of the construction professions within schools, both in terms of the pupils attending them and the teachers advising on careers. Almost all of the students surveyed (83%) said there is a need for more awareness in schools on careers in the construction industry.

Many feel that their school viewed the industry as only made up of the construction trades.

“the first thing that comes to people’s mind when talking about construction within schools is putting brick on brick. If they knew about various roles and the opportunities in the construction industry, it would be more appealing.”

“A lot of people at school assumed that the only career in construction is being a contractor/builders; there is little knowledge of the vast array of jobs available for people with different interests etc.”

Schools are commonly pushing the careers they are more familiar with, such as teaching, law and medicine. Students aren’t being encouraged into construction by their schools. Without this guidance from the education system many pupils may never consider the sector’s career prospects.



## Construction industry must build links with schools

For the sector to meet future skills demands there needs to be better representation in schools of the construction sector and its professions.

As just one example of the pressure on the construction professions, the Construction Skills Network Forecasts 2016 – 2020 report estimates that the sector will need to increase the annual requirement for surveyors from 70,740 today to 75,530 by 2020. Added to this required increase in people, is the fact that the industry suffers from an ageing workforce, with an unusually high amount of people in the industry approaching retirement.

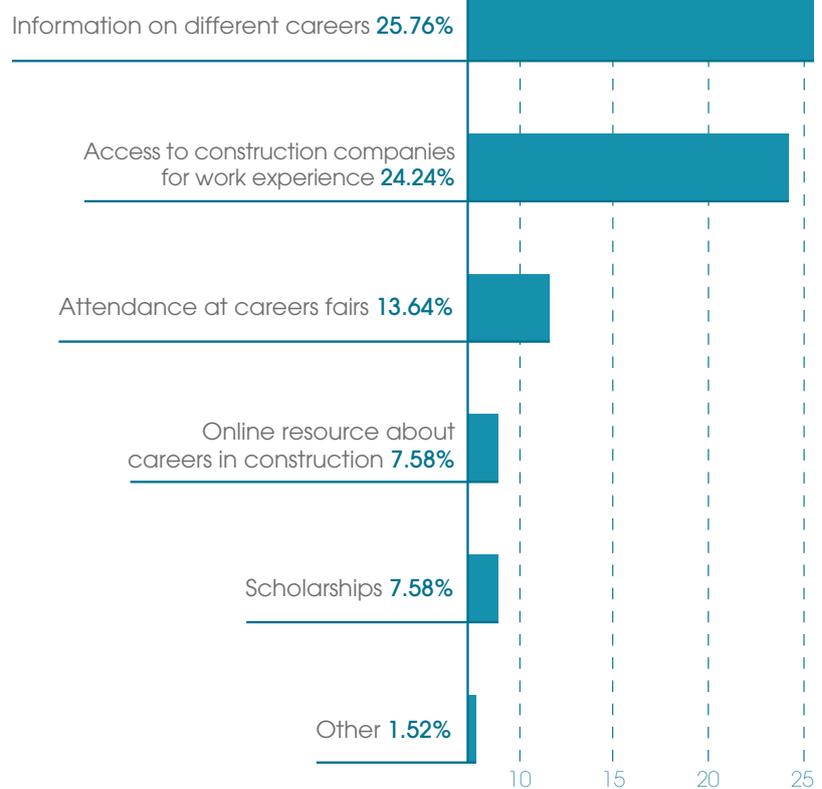
Work experience is one of the most valuable ways of getting people into the industry. Therefore, it's vital that companies make opportunities available and actively promote them. Over 60% of the students, when at school, wanted to be better engaged with by construction companies and

have access to information on the different careers within the industry.

In order to not only maintain, but to increase the amount of people entering the construction industry, the sector needs to build stronger links

with schools. An increase in relationships between the companies that make up the construction industry and the UK's schools would make a big difference in engaging young people and attracting them into the industry.

**Q: What construction career information would you have liked to have access to at school?**



## Raising awareness at the source of the issue

The industry must target students in their formative years. Students start to think about their career options between the ages of 10 to 16, with 10% starting before the age of 10. It is therefore imperative that the construction industry is engaged with schools at the point when students are determining their career paths. Early involvement will help students to open their eyes to the opportunities and choose the right subjects to set them on the path to a career in construction.

The majority of the people who go onto pursue a career in construction, do so because of the influence of family and friends or their own research. Students tell us that they want more work experience and for the sector, there is a big opportunity to improve on the amount of work experience currently on offer.

Through the likes of the RICS, CIOB and the Construction Youth Trust there is great work being undertaken to actively target and educate young people within schools on the opportunities the industry has to offer.

However, in England alone there are over 3000 secondary schools and nearly 4800 Academies and free schools (according to the ONS 2015). These organisations have a huge task ahead of them without a substantial increase in effort from the industry to support their involvement with schools.

There is great benefit to be had from companies engaging with schools. This is due to the familiarity created on a placement year. Work experience builds a very strong bond with a company. This bond breeds loyalty and a desire to work for that company when the experience has been positive.

## An identity crisis

The image of the sector has improved from where we were ten years ago. However, it is still seen as a barrier to getting more people into construction, with sexism and white van man trade stereotypes still prevailing popular beliefs. Proactive communication by the sector would start to dispel the old stereotypes of the industry. Students cite corruption, poor health and safety, and projects over budget.

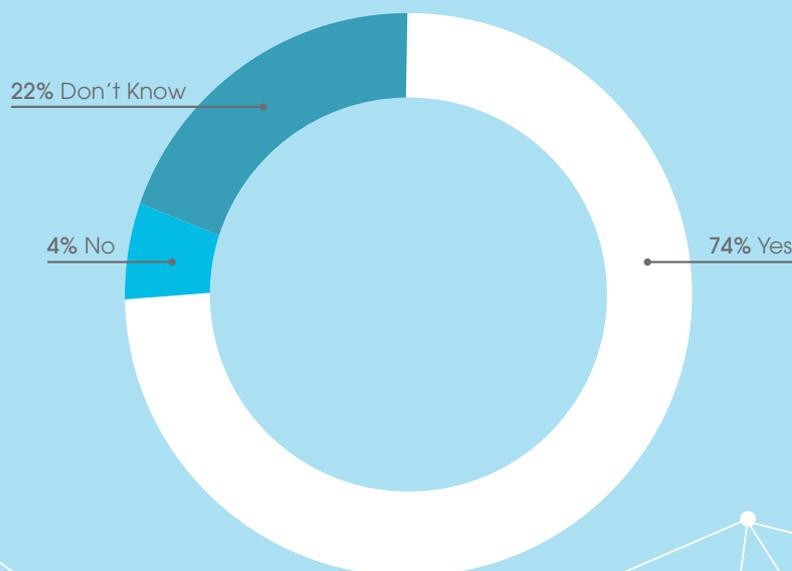
“there appears to be a reluctance to modernize or move with the times.”

But almost 50% rate the sector as ‘better’ than others because of its current growth, and 74% of those surveyed thought that the construction sector offers good prospects for them.

“Surveying in particular is not publicised at a school level. Regional barriers are also an issue, for example the best construction opportunities are often not nationally available.”

With around 80% of construction undergraduates changing their course by the 3rd year (between the 4 disciplines). Quantity surveying seems to be the most popular profession with over half changing their degree course to this profession.

Q: In your opinion does the construction sector offer good career prospects?



## Getting the message right

Students who have a good awareness of the sector are attracted to the industry because of factors such as career variety, challenging projects, demanding environments and on and off site work. Just like the Army recruitment campaign of the 90s 'To be Frank join the Army', the industry needs to be present in schools and promote the factors that relate to young people, showcasing why the industry is a great place to start their careers.

There is a very real opportunity to get the message into schools about the skills and variety of work life that the construction industry provides.

*"As a female, I wanted to do something out of the box, which is a career in construction."*

*"The opportunity to make an impact on the industry as a woman."*

These are the messages that can be used to dispel the negative associations that have long plagued the industry. Companies within the sector have a vital role in showcasing the exciting, dynamic and forward thinking nature of the UK construction sector.

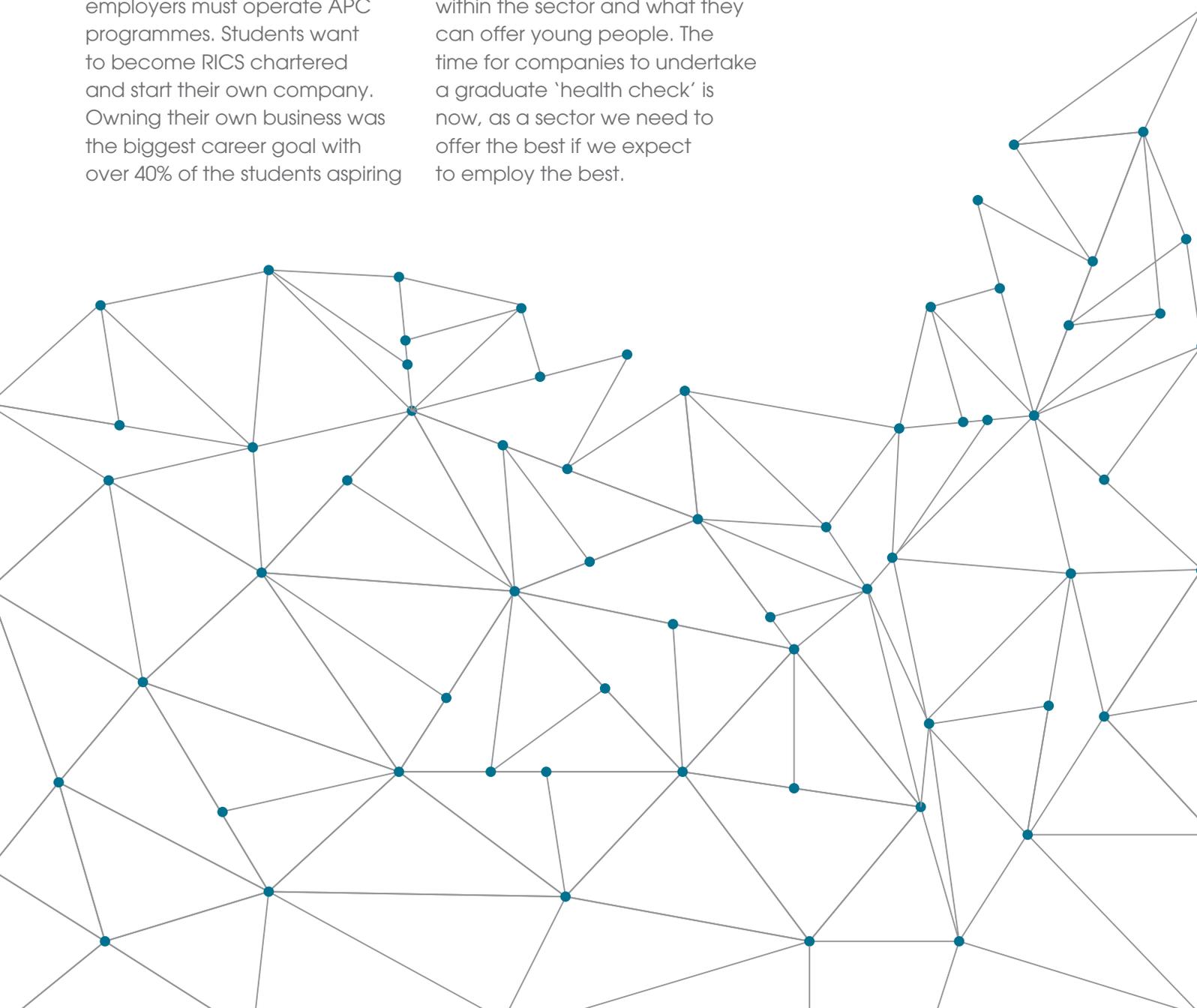
# Training and variety key to attracting talent

Career progression, training and development and variety of projects are the top three things that undergraduates look for in an employer. While a competitive salary is important, a healthy work life balance was also equally as important, followed by job security.

To attract the right talent, employers must operate APC programmes. Students want to become RICS chartered and start their own company. Owning their own business was the biggest career goal with over 40% of the students aspiring

to work for themselves. This in turn raises the question of why they are so keen to work for themselves and what is it they don't think they can get from an employer?

Attracting the best talent into the sector will be fundamental to its future growth. Key to this will be the attractiveness of companies within the sector and what they can offer young people. The time for companies to undertake a graduate 'health check' is now, as a sector we need to offer the best if we expect to employ the best.



## Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear that there is a lack of career guidance for school children interested in the construction professions and also a lack of knowledge from the undergraduates about the companies and figure heads who make up the industry they are about to join.

It is evident from the research that there seems to be a PR issue for the construction industry within schools. There appears to be little awareness from teachers and career advisers of the opportunities within the industry. For this reason, there is little driving schools to promote the professional construction services.

There is a wide range of great resources available to those interested in the industry, provided by both the sector and the Government. The RICS's Class of Your Own, the Construction Youth Trust's Budding Brunel's scheme and the CITB's Go Construct all offer fantastic resources to help educate school children on the opportunities within our industry.

The National Career Service is another excellent resource as well as the charity, Education and Employees who link with the RICS and the CIOB on their Inspiring the Future campaign. This charity campaign connects schools and colleges with employers and people from the world of work.

The problem therefore is not that school children don't have access to information about careers in the construction industry, it's that they're not even looking. The issue the sector has to solve is how to get children asking the questions in the first place.

The task for the sector is huge as, according to the ONS, in England alone there are 8.4 million pupils enrolled in state funded and independent schools and 2.7 million pupils enrolled in Academies. The only effective way to deliver a message to these pupils is through the support of sector companies from across the breadth of the UK.

## Who educates the educators?

It is up to the construction industry to take action and show children and teachers who do not have access to the industry through friends and family, just what they are missing and what the opportunities are.

The research points to four key actions:

1. The need to encourage better engagement between local companies and schools. These links with schools, should be undertaken in conjunction with organisations such as the RICS or the Construction Youth Trust.
2. Lobbying to get information on the available resources about the construction professions into the Department of Education's non statutory advice documents on Guidance for Schools Careers Advisers.
3. A central resource and information point that students can go to find information on the industry/professions, bringing all the industry's resources together in one place.
4. An industry wide PR campaign to engage with students and to create a strong and positive image of the sector.

Decisions about entering the construction professions need to be made at the age of 16 or below. This is when career choices are being formed which define the academic choices which will go on to shape their careers.

Great work is already being undertaken, but those doing the doing need more support from the industry. The time to start getting into schools and highlighting the opportunities and rewards is now. Rather than continuing to talk about it within the walls of the industry the sector needs to get out there and target the problem at the source.

