

FUTURE SKILLS FUTURE WORKFORCE FUTURE PROOF



Building the Future with Employer Engagement

Sector: Construction/Civil Engineering

Location: Sheffield, UK

The brief

The UK's economic recovery is bringing with it a number of major infrastructure projects offering a wealth of job opportunities for those willing to up-skill or re-train.



Innovative solutions for large-scale projects

Bridgwater College is a leader in developing innovative solutions to meet large scale construction and civil engineering requirements. They work with local and national partners to ensure courses are at the highest standard, meeting the needs of industry and providing opportunities for learners from all backgrounds to acquire the essential skills for greater national productivity.

Among these major projects is Hinkley Point C, the first in a series of proposed nuclear new builds throughout the UK, and the first nuclear power station to be built in this country for 20 years. Many of the skills required for the 10-year construction phase are new and, in order to deliver the project on time and on budget, the development of innovative, accredited training programmes - nationally recognised and meeting the rigorous standards of this highly regulated industry - is key.

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Thousands of jobs, hundreds of apprenticeships

Hinkley Point C will create thousands of job opportunities for local people, including up to 500 apprenticeships. For the past four years, Bridgwater College has been working in close partnership with EDF Energy and its Tier 1 contractors to develop a new curriculum to support the project and create a sustainable legacy of standards and qualifications for the nuclear new build industry worldwide.

There has been significant investment by both the College and EDF Energy; for civil engineering a £2m, 8-acre, 'live' Construction Skills and Innovation Centre has been created, offering training in excavation, ground works, concrete pouring, formwork and steelfixing. In addition, a state-of-the-art facility for engineering training has been built, part of the South West hub for the National Skills Academy, Nuclear.

In the four years since these facilities opened, the College has seen engineering apprentice and student numbers increase by 400% and an extension to accommodate advanced engineering training is under way, with further industry and LEP investment committed.

These resources have enabled the College to develop and deliver the UK's first accredited qualifications in various disciplines. Course recruitment has been coordinated with local Job Centre Plus offices to offer marginalised and disengaged young people and adults a range of civil engineering pre-employment programmes that increase confidence, promote industry-specific skills and behaviours and facilitate entry/re-entry to the world of work. In addition, the strong vocational bias of these programmes means that people without strong academic qualifications can acquire new knowledge in a practical, realistic working environment, acquiring skills targeted at tangible job opportunities in the locality.

1200 steelfixers for Hinkley's new reactors

A prime example of this approach is steelfixing. Working under the UK CES Employer Ownership of Skills programme with principal contractor Laing O'Rourke, awarding body NOCN and the University of the West of England, the College has assisted in the development of a suite of formal steelfixing qualifications - from apprenticeships through to supervisory at Level 4 - to address the training needs for this critical skill. There are around 2600 steelfixers across the UK, whose average age is 56 years, yet the Hinkley Point C project alone will require 600 for each of its two new reactors.

There is therefore an urgent need to attract a huge number of new entrants to the industry, and for contractors to formally accredit their existing steelfixing workforce. Most steelfixers start out as labourers and learn on the job; however, past experience on nuclear new builds in France has demonstrated that failure to adequately train the steelfixing workforce can have serious repercussions in terms of delays and costly re-work - the need to professionalise this industry is paramount.

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What we delivered

Over 200 people applied to join the College's March 2014 pilot programme in steelfixing, many of them long-term unemployed. 24 were selected, and of the 16 that completed successfully, 15 are now employed as steelfixing apprentices with Laing O'Rourke, working on building sites across the UK, earning excellent salaries and learning new life skills, such as living away from home, managing money and operating as part of a close-knit team.

These new apprentices describe the steelfixing programme as having a transformational effect on their lives. Robert Palmer, who was part of the pilot cohort and formerly unemployed, said: *"The instructors have years of steelfixing experience behind them, so we really respected their answers and their attitude, which was firm but fair. The College has opened up a whole new way of life for me and my family, and discovering that I had been successful in my application to become a steelfixing apprentice with Laing O'Rourke was one of the best moments of my life."*

His colleague, Tom Baker, added:

"The staff at the College had high expectations and applied the rules exactly as they would on a real-life construction site – but we really looked up to them for that. They treated us with respect, which you don't always get when you're unemployed. My proudest moment was realising that I am going to be a steelfixing apprentice with Laing O'Rourke."

Building for the future

It is hugely rewarding to see the impact this opportunity has had on the lives of these men and their families, who are now making a real contribution to society as employees, consumers and taxpayers. Further steelfixing programmes are set to run as soon as the nuclear new build starts in earnest, with demand expected to exceed 350 candidates in 2016 alone.

The Steelfixing apprenticeship has now been confirmed as meeting the Government's criteria for the new employer-led 'Trailblazer' apprenticeship standards, which means even more opportunity for people to become Steelfixing apprentices.

Where we added value

Benchmark for innovation, quality and excellence

This ground-breaking partnership between Bridgwater College, Laing O'Rourke and NOCN is establishing a benchmark for innovation, quality and excellence for the nuclear new build industry UK wide, whilst enabling companies of all sizes to professionalise their workforce and enter the supply chain. The impact on the community has been significant, with substantial numbers of long-term unemployed re-entering the workplace as Somerset enters one of the most transformational periods in recent history.

