

Kensington and Chelsea College has plenty of takers for its construction courses

Teaching trades to all-comers

TRAINING

MARK SMULIAN

The construction industry has campaigned for years to overcome its perennial skills shortage by improving its image among young people.

Should it simply have encouraged television home makeover programmes?

These are what have helped Kensington and Chelsea College to fill places in its new construction skills centre in west London, according to its community manager Matthew Corbett.

Industry skill shortages have proved a business opportunity for this college, which did not even teach construction until last autumn, and has since seen a strong demand for all its courses since it opened.

"People have seen those TV programmes and want the skills to do it for themselves. It's been a kind of viral marketing for construction and has provided role models," Mr Corbett says.

"All our research pointed to

there being a large demand for skilled construction workers, so we decided to see what we could do to meet employers' needs.

"People in London see construction booming around them, and they are interested. Plumbing seems to be particularly in demand, as they know they get well paid to do that, although judging by job advertisements pretty much every skill is in high demand."

Younger students will normally go on to apprenticeships with employers.

But among older students, including the ex-offenders on specially financed courses, self-employment is the most popular destination.

Mr Corbett says: "Once they are about 25 they think 'I can make a lot more money working for myself'. At their



"My teaching style only varies with the younger ones, because I'm more tolerant with them!"
Mark Onasanya



An increasing number of people see construction as a career opportunity

age, whether or not they are ex-offenders, they all have the ambition that they don't want to work for someone else anymore."

Learning core skills

Both routes help the industry to fill its ranks in plastering, carpentry, painting and decorating, bricklaying and plumbing – the skills currently taught.

Most trainees fit into one of three streams: adult ex-offenders on the Government's Skillsweb programme; school leavers aged 16-19; and school students aged 14-19 on vocational courses, plus a few people training for a hobby.

The ex-offenders' training is financed through the European Social Fund, which also offers

them help with expenses.

Mr Corbett says: "The ESF pays for more socially excluded groups who have had some interaction with the criminal justice system.

"When people come out of custody they can find it difficult to get back into work.

"Psychologically it affects them as a shock to the system, which I suppose is what it is meant to be, so we do a lot of work around coaching and supporting people to get them into work, which is the best way to reduce re-offending in the long term."

The Introduction to Basic Skills course gives a taste of all trades, which allows students to decide which they prefer, but it is valuable in itself.

Plastering tutor Mark Onasanya says: "It goes towards them getting a job as they gain experience in building trades and everyone will have done a bit of several things.

"Employers like it because it means that if, say, a plasterer finds a radiator on the wall they can deal with it without having to call in a plumber."

Mr Onasanya teaches all the age groups and says: "My teaching style only varies with the younger ones, because I'm more tolerant with them!

"They need a lot of health and safety training, because there are dangerous things all over the place here."

Trainees need jobs when they complete their courses, and many initially head for the

public sector, either directly or to contractors working for local authorities or housing associations or to other projects involving public funding.

Quotas for ex-offenders

Far from being deterred from taking workers with problematic backgrounds, their contracts often require them to employ a fixed proportion of people who are ex-offenders, or are socially excluded in some way.

Mr Corbett says: "We work with all the largest housing associations in London, and are building up our links with them and with local authorities, as they are always recruiting.

"For first jobbers those are good avenues to get in as they can continue training here on day release or evening courses. Once we have got someone into work we still help to move them forward."

The college is talking to major employers about how courses could be tailored to their particular needs.

"There is always a big turnover of people and employers can have particular demands and want things added on to training. For example they might want a particular element of plumbing taught," he says.

"The challenge for everyone here is to provide what employers want."

MORE INFO ONLINE

To find out how the college teaches softer skills go to cnplus.co.uk/yourbusiness

TRAINING OPTIONS AT THE CONSTRUCTION CENTRE

Kensington and Chelsea College opened its construction centre last November, and offers a variety of courses.

Apprenticeships These are targeted at young people aged 16-24. They are visited regularly while at work by college assessors, who give advice and guidance, and they can attend college workshops to progress their training.

Train to Gain Is for employees aged over 25 and is usually offered at their employer's workplace, where skills will be taught by a visiting trainer on a one-to-one or small group basis. In some cases, training can be offered free of

charge or at subsidised rates.

Introductory Certificate in Basic Construction Skills

This gives a taste of brickwork, plastering, plumbing, electrics, painting and decorating and carpentry and joinery to new entrants. This course is for any new starter in the industry, but is normally free under the Government's Skillsweb programme to recent ex-offenders, who are expected to show "commitment, punctuality, a willingness to achieve and a respect for our centre".

Foundation Construction Award, and Intermediate Construction Award Offered at

present in plastering, brickwork, painting and decorating.

Asset Level 1 Course in plumbing.

The college plans to add a diploma in construction from September 2008.

Students on all courses also receive support, if they need it, in literacy and numeracy.

Numeracy is taught as part of the measurement of materials and estimating, and for example, in guidance on handling self-employed tax affairs.

Literacy includes training in devising a business plan, creating publicity, communication with clients and presentation of CVs.