

# Sector Experts highlight collaboration as key to competency in built environment

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Cross-sector collaboration is vital in shaping a more dynamic, skilled and adaptable construction and built environment workforce.

This was the conclusion reached by experts who attended '*Collaborative Futures: Competence, Capability & Capacity*', hosted by the University College of Estate Management (UCEM) on Wednesday 17 July 2024 in Central London.

The event, which brought together the [Construction Industry Council](#), [Construction Leadership Council](#), [Technical Apprenticeships Consortium](#), [Supply Chain Sustainability School](#) and [the Edge](#), convened leaders from built environment employers, professional bodies, regulators, training providers, educational institutions and government.

The event aimed to share innovative strategies and best practices for educating and upskilling the sector's workforce to ensure competence, increase capacity and enhance capability.

## KEY FACTORS IN DEVELOPING AN ADAPTABLE WORKFORCE

The value in training your workforce holistically was the focus of the opening presentation by Tony Ellender, Professional Development Manager for Balfour Beatty UK, who described how the firm integrates various competencies, from accredited technical and professional qualifications to leadership skills in their team members. Balfour Beatty UK has introduced initiatives such as a 'Military Talent Pathway' for veterans and structured career progression for all. Tony concluded by noting that collaboration, both internal and external, is crucial in helping Balfour Beatty UK address skills gaps and enabling career transitions across their business.

Jon Vanstone, Chair of the Building Safety Regulator's Industry Competence Committee (ICC, which sits within the Health & Safety Executive) emphasised the importance of elevating competence in the building industry. Highlighting the tragic consequences of inadequate safety standards, he underscored the need for a culture of excellence, not just compliance. The ICC aims to bridge industry and regulatory gaps, promoting continuous improvement and accountability. Through initiatives such as specialist working groups and stringent competence requirements, the ICC supports the industry in ensuring safe, resilient buildings built with integrity.

Dale Sinclair, Chair of the Construction Industry Council's Digital Forum, discussed the impending paradigm shift in the construction industry, driven by AI, modern methods of construction and the need to achieve net zero. He stressed the importance of data integration, the human-AI interface and the move towards refurbishing buildings rather than demolishing them.

#### ENHANCING COMPETENCY, CAPABILITY AND CAPACITY

The three speakers' comments segued into a panel discussion, chaired by Ashley Wheaton, UCEM Vice Chancellor, around the event's key themes of 'Competency', 'Capability' and 'Capacity'.

Ruth Devine MBE, Chair of the Electrotechnical Skills Partnership, who received her MBE for services to further education and apprenticeships, advocated for relevant and robust training aligned with occupational standards, advising awarding bodies, government agencies and educational institutions to "listen to employers. Don't assume you're acting in their interest; instead, meaningfully engage and represent them. You might hear uncomfortable truths, but we need that to develop clear pathways of competence that work."

Jon Vanstone, who was returning after his speaking slot, concurred, arguing the key to meeting the sector's skills challenges was cooperation, observing that too often the content of training and education is developed in isolation from those, such as employers and contractors, who have the practical experience of construction, design and installation. He called for transparent communication, collaboration and a commitment to upholding the highest standards in every project.

Tony Ellender, who had covered similar topics when speaking earlier in the day, acknowledged Ruth and Jon's points, observing that, "The best way to make employees leave is to not train them. But there's only one thing worse than training someone and they leave – not training them and they stay." Tony also suggested that employers need to think beyond even their staff, but also about the competence of those in their supply chain if they are to deliver truly safe and sustainable buildings.

Holly Hansen-Maughan, Sector Manager for Retrofit & Future Workforce at Supply Chain Sustainability School, an expert in sustainability and green skills, picked up on Tony's thoughts and called for commonality within the industry to address future skills. She described the role of the Supply Chain Sustainability School in upskilling the workforce, underlining the importance of collective decision-making and the integration of education partners to align training.

Mina Hasman, Chair of the Construction Industry Council's Climate Change Committee, talked about the importance of education as the foundation for building skills and awareness across the industry. She argued the need for collaboration across the value chain and consistent learning to influence actions, saying "Education is crucial for building base-level knowledge and influencing behaviours across the

industry. Collaboration is a must for us to accelerate the pace and scale of change needed for climate resilience”.

Panellists also debated topics less often covered in discussions of skills and training, such as the need for financial literacy across the built environment workforce. Tony Ellender, talking about the construction sector in particular, observed, *“in an industry with circa 3% margins, everybody needs financial competence”*.

#### ADDRESSING THE SKILLS GAP: INSIGHTS FROM INDUSTRY EXPERT MARK FARMER

Addressing the event via a pre-recorded video, Mark Farmer, author of the ‘Farmer Review’, an influential review of the UK’s construction labour model entitled *‘Modernise or Die’*, gave his perspectives on the topics under discussion.

Mark elucidated the *“skills gap”* in construction, namely the mismatch between required capabilities and those possessed by the workforce. This mismatch is particularly relevant in the context of green initiatives and regulatory reforms. He observed, *“The Building Safety Act and the need for high-performing buildings mean that people are having to learn different approaches to their job.”*

He also discussed the concept of *“role and competence inflation”* where the high demand for skills in a labour-scarce market leads to individuals being promoted beyond their competencies. This trend poses significant risks, especially in senior management roles, potentially compromising project outcomes. *“If people aren’t competent to perform senior roles, then the impact and legacy that leaves on projects downstream can be massive”* Mark warned.

Mark concluded by emphasising the importance of a dual approach to training within the industry, combining professional training and education regimes with continuous professional development (CPD) programs. This approach is vital in an era of rapid regulatory and technological changes. *“The need to keep that currency of your professional competence through CPD is going to become more important”* Mark asserted. He also suggested that the policing of CPD might need to become more stringent to ensure its effectiveness.

#### COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO UPSKILLING

Aled Williams, Chair, Construction Industry Council Education & Future Skills Committee who gave opening remarks on the day said, *“Today’s event has highlighted the pressing need for an integrated approach to education and skills development within the construction and built environment sectors. The insights and strategies shared underline the importance of aligning educational programmes with the practical requirements of the industry.”*

*“At the Construction Industry Council’s Education & Future Skills Committee, we are committed to driving forward initiatives that ensure our workforce is equipped with the necessary skills and competencies to meet current and future challenges. Collaboration among all stakeholders is essential in building a resilient and adaptable industry.”*