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CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY ADVISORY COMMITTEE (CONIAC)			
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## **Routes to Competence of Site Based Operatives and Supervisors- Findings of Research and Recommendations**

**A paper by Gordon Crick, Construction Sector**

### **Purpose of the paper**

For information and discussion at the 13 July 2011 Meeting of CONIAC

**This paper describes the findings of recently-published research commissioned jointly by HSE and CITB-ConstructionSkills examining the routes to competence for site-based operatives and supervisors in the construction industry. It describes the initial industry reaction to the research and suggests a mechanism by which the recommendations of the research may be considered further and taken forward.**

### **Background**

1. The 2007 revision of the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations (CDM 2007) introduced a competence requirement for construction workers. The response of the construction industry to this requirement has undoubtedly improved the emphasis on individual competence markedly. However, the growing complexity of the competence landscape gave rise to concerns that there was no consistent understanding of what constituted competence, and that this lack of common understanding was proving a barrier to further improving the health and safety performance of the industry.
2. In 2009, in recognition of these concerns, HSE and ConstructionSkills jointly commissioned research to examine the main routes by which construction workers become competent, and to map out the underlying levels of qualifications held by site-based operatives and supervisors.
3. The research was undertaken by Pye Tait Consulting, and was published on 26 May 2011 as HSE Research Report RR877<sup>1</sup>. The main findings of the research were presented to industry stakeholders on 17 June

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr877.htm>

2011. This paper presents the main findings of the research and suggests a mechanism by which the industry might take forward further work which is suggested by it.

### **Research – key messages**

4. The research comments that the variety of approaches taken by the industry to competence have probably made a substantial contribution to improving the health and safety performance of the industry, although cause and effect are difficult to separate. However, it comments further that historical improvements in the health and safety performance of the construction industry – as measured by fatal and major injury rates – have not outstripped improvements made in other industries.

5. The key findings of the research report are that:

- There is low penetration of competence-based qualifications in key occupations – particular in the case of unskilled workers and site supervisors: Labour Force Survey figures for 2009 suggest that only 12% of the construction workforce hold a full National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) or Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) at level 2 or above.
- The complexity and number of card and safety passport schemes used for ‘evidencing’ competence, and the cost and inconsistency of their application mean that contractors misunderstand what the holding of any particular card does – and does not – demonstrate.
- There has been a shift towards an output-based National Occupational Standard (NOS)/ S/NVQ approach to competence. This is not compatible with a broader understanding of competence which is needed for safe working, and which needs to consider input-taught knowledge and skills.
- The NOS /S/NVQ approach is inherently limited by its job-specific one-off approach to assessment. It does not support an understanding of how ‘lifelong learning’ can be achieved.
- There is a need for whatever approach to competence assessment is used to address the area of so-called ‘out of context risks’ such as those involving a labourer asked to work at height, or an individual tradesperson being transferred to an unfamiliar site.
- The existing understanding of ‘competence’ therefore needs to move from a ‘once and for all’ approach to a model of ‘continuous competence development’ which embodies situational awareness and human factors.

- The research terms this shift 'New Competence'. It reflects that embedding this approach will require a step change in the understanding of the construction industry of what competence is and how it is developed.
- Finally, the research suggests that the industry should consider establishing a Card Registration Authority, which would improve the transparency and consistency of the various card schemes. It suggests that such an Authority would be responsible for monitoring and accrediting all card schemes against a clear set of standards. It suggests that under such a system all card schemes should require the achievement of a nationally-recognised formal qualification.

### **Initial industry response**

6. Two meetings were held on Friday 17 June 2011 to feedback the findings of the research to industry and allow the industry to provide an initial response to the research findings. The first meeting was aimed at the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) with a presence in the construction industry, and the second one to wider industry organisations.

7. Both meetings generated a wide ranging and detailed discussion. There was acceptance that there are a number of shortcomings in the way that existing card schemes operate in practice and that there is a need for a more universally-understood concept of what competence is, and how it can be assessed and demonstrated.

8. Secondly, whilst cautious about the need to ensure that it did not simply impose an additional layer of cost and bureaucracy, the industry appeared to support in principle that some form of card registration authority has the potential to make substantial improvements. No conclusion was reached, however, about the mechanism by which this might be considered.

### **Argument**

9. The findings of the research point to a fundamental problem with the operation of card schemes, with the understanding of what competence is, how it can be delivered, and how and when it is assessed: it makes the case that competence is not a simple binary concept.

10. Furthermore, the findings of the research are echoed in the emerging findings of the evaluation of the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007. This has suggested that the competence requirements of CDM 2007 are not well embedded, and contractors expressed concerns about the bureaucracy they perceive in the way that card schemes in particular operate.

11. Any response to these concerns by the construction industry would need to consider a radical approach that develops a broader, shared understanding of competence in the widest sense. At the same time the response should address the inconsistency of approach between the multitude of schemes which purport to demonstrate it.

12. Furthermore, the industry response needs to consider the views of a wide range of stakeholders. These should include SSCs, scheme operators, contractors and worker representatives.

### **Action**

13. There appears to be a general appetite for reform. Moving from the current position will be a challenging task which will require industry leadership and co-operation across all sectors.

14. CONIAC is therefore invited to:

- note and comment on the contents of this paper, in particular :
  - i. the summary of research findings:
  - ii. moving to an approach on competence as proposed in the research;
  - iii. the suggestion that a Card Registration Authority be established.
- consider how the industry can move this work on.

### **Contact**

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