Why are Irish School Leavers Pursuing A Higher Education Degree Rather Than Joining A Skilled Trade

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the main influences on school-leavers' decision to pursue a career path in the construction industry through either a higher-level degree or a skilled trades program in Ireland. Additionally, this study examined how the key influencers on school-leavers, such as parents, teachers and career counsellors view the construction sector. The research applied a mixed-methods research approach. A survey was conducted among 200 mainly 6th year school-leavers across four secondary schools in the Wicklow and Wexford areas in Ireland. Through a questionnaire data was collected about their reasons for deciding on a higher-level degree compared to a skilled trades program. The influencers' perspective on the construction sector was assessed through semi-structured interviews, enabling triangulation of the data. The findings indicate that most school-leavers were given more information about higher education options than apprenticeship. Furthermore, the research suggests that most school-leavers believed that higher education is considered a superior pathway over joining skilled trades courses. School-leavers see apprenticeships as a lesser achievement than higher education. There is a need to address negative stereotyping associated with apprenticeships and to inform students in secondary school early about the alternative study pathways and career opportunities.

Key Words: Skilled trade, university, apprenticeships, career, Ireland

1 Introduction

The construction industry in Ireland is experiencing a major skills shortage across a range of crucial construction-related skilled trades, including electricians, carpenters, joiners, pipefitters, scaffolders and many other trades (McNaboe et al., 2019). The primary reasons that may have given rise to this deficiency include an unforeseen increase in the demand for skilled trades and a decrease in the number of students with skilled trades qualifications (McNaboe, et al. 2019). According to the National Skills

Council (2020) an insufficient number of people with skilled trade qualifications have been available to meet the required labour demands. The National Skills Council (2020) also reported that 15% of the vacancies continue to remain unfilled as difficulties persist with successful recruitment for these roles. Aligned with this, registrations for skilled trades and apprenticeship programs have fallen drastically in the past decade to its lowest level in 2010 since the economic recession in Ireland in 2007-2008. Prior to the recession, total new registration for apprenticeship programs in Ireland were consistently more than 8,000 individuals per annum (Ó Murchadha & Murphy, 2016). However, post-recession apprenticeship registrations have fallen dramatically, and construction-related apprentice registration have not exceeded 1,000 applications per annum. (Ó Murchadha & Murphy, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the main influences on school-leavers' decision to pursue a career path in the construction industry through either a higher-level degree or a skilled trades course in Ireland.

2 Analysing the Skills Shortages in the Irish Construction Sector

While 90% of school-leavers in Ireland remain in full-time education after their Leaving Certificate, 65% of each year's cohort progresses onto third-level education (college, university etc) (Mooney, 2021). Registrations into higher education have increased steadily in the past 15 years in Ireland. See figure 1. (CSO, N.D).

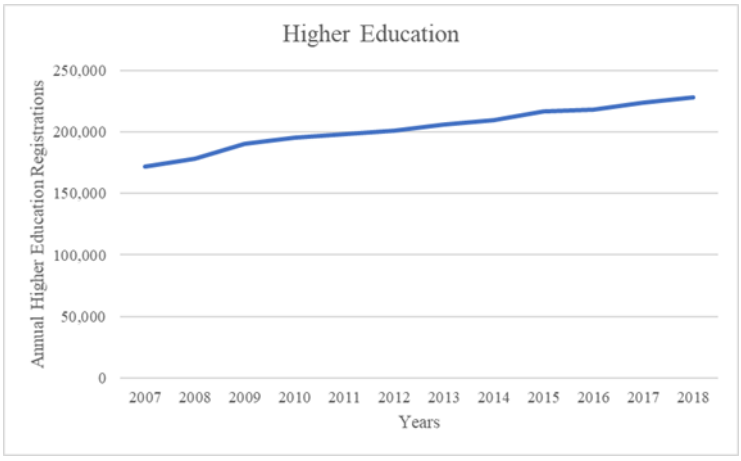

Figure 1. Annual Higher Education Registrations in Ireland (CSO, N.D)

In comparison, registrations for apprenticeship programs have fallen drastically since the economic recession in Ireland in 2007-2008. Total new registration for skilled trades and apprenticeship programs were consistently more than 8,000 individuals per annum prior to the recession (Ó Murchadha & Murphy, 2016). Figure 2 shows a major drop in the construction related apprenticeship registrations post-recession In Ireland which have not exceeded 1,000 applications per year.

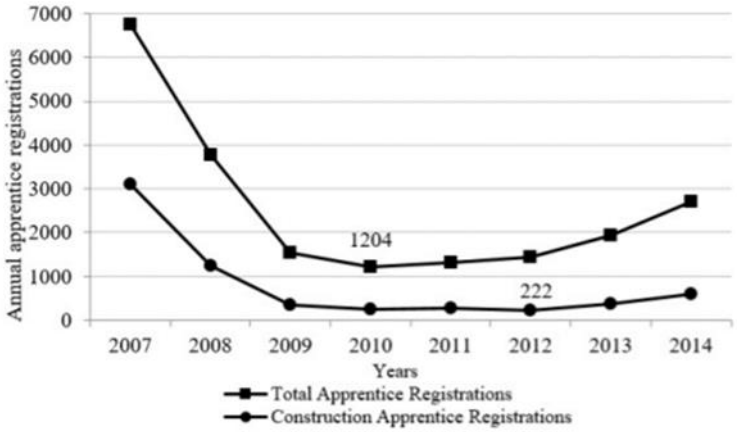

Figure 2. Annual Apprenticeship Registrations in Ireland (Ó Murchadha & Murphy, 2016)

2.1 Skills Shortage Effects in Ireland

Richardson (2007) asserts that the term 'shortage' occurs whereby the supply of workers is not sufficient to meet demands. A skills shortage can arise from a variety of reasons and may occur as a result a persistent increase in the demand for particular skills or the reduction in the number of students who are obtaining the relevant qualifications (Richardson, 2007).

In 2015, nearly 50% of all contractors and subcontractors in Ireland encountered a skills shortage (Fitzgerald, 2019). Four years later in 2019, the skills shortage by contractors and subcontractors had increased to 86% according to Fitzgerald (2019). The Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Ireland indicated that many recently qualified apprentices had emigrated abroad (Ó Murchadha and Murphy, 2016). These findings indicate a worrying trend in the skilled workers shortages in Ireland.

In the short term, employers in Ireland have addressed the skills shortage by enticing skilled tradespersons from other European countries to work in construction in Ireland. However, SOLAS, the Irish State Agency for Further Education and Training, highlighted that the lack of available qualified tradespersons may become a significant issue in the long-term for the recovery of the labour market in Ireland (Behan et al., 2015).

2.2 School-Leavers Paths Post Leaving Certificate

Mooney (2021) indicates that 65% of each year's school-leavers' cohort progresses onto higher education. Higher education options remain a desired goal for school-leavers in Ireland. The Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris has stated "I think we should drop the snobby attitude in this country . . . that everyone should be funneled straight from secondary school into university. We're behind the curve in relation to things like apprenticeships" (O'Brien, 2020). The Irish Times newspaper suggest that apprenticeships are being 'undersold' by secondary schools in Ireland (The Irish Times, 2019).

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and EY Foundation in the UK found that 86% of school-leavers had been given information about attending universities, while only 48% of students confirmed to have received information about apprenticeship programs (Miller, 2016). Miller's findings in the UK mirror those in Ireland. Figure 3 shows that the number of school-leavers choosing the higher education option was 53%, which was considerably higher than school-leavers choosing for an apprenticeship program (McCoy et al., 2014).

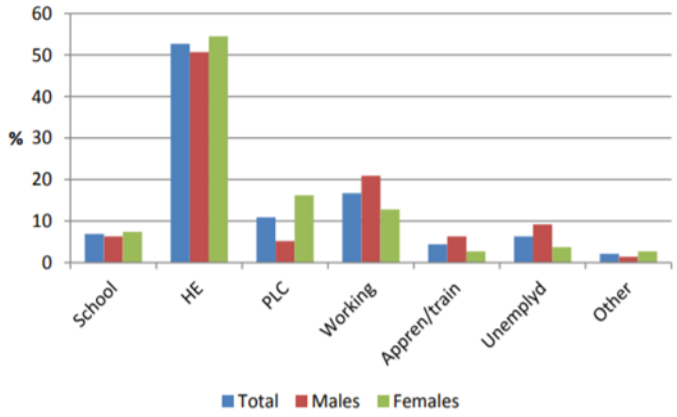

Figure 3. Main Paths for School-Leavers (McCoy et al., 2014)

2.3 School-Leavers' Key Influencers when Deciding a Career in Construction

It is important to investigate how school-leavers make their career choices and to assess the key influencers around them. Traditionally, the key influencers include parents, teachers and career advisors (Twumasi et al., 2018). McCoy et al. (2014) reported that school guidance counsellors (83%) are the main source of advice, followed by mothers (73%) and fathers (61%). However, Smyth, Banks and Calvert (2011) contend that parents are the primary source of advice, ahead of school guidance counsellors.

The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) (2013) suggested that the construction industry as a career choice scored a 6.2 out of 10 by parents while only 5.6 out of 10 by career advisors (Waters and McAlpine, 2016). However, Waters and McAlpine (2016) identified that there is a lack of knowledge about the career opportunities and progression routes in the construction sector among the key influencers. Yet, the roles in the construction industry are often considered to be dirty and not suited for school-leavers who could get into higher education (Waters & McAlpine, 2016)., Clarke and Boyd (2011) also posit that many youths today do not perceive construction trades as a professional, honest or trustworthy career path.

According to Paulsen et al. (2001), parental beliefs have the greatest impact on school-leavers planning for further education. The National House Building Council Foundation (NHCB) in the UK cautioned in 2016 that four in ten parents would discourage young people from entering a building trade (Waters & McAlpine, 2016). This highlights a clear stigma against skilled trades within the construction industry. On the other hand, the Transport Infrastructure Skills Strategy 2016 expresses that parents

have an assured stance of construction engineering, which demonstrates that feasibly not all careers within the construction industry are viewed negatively (Waters & McAlpine, 2016).

2.4 Career Advisors and Their Influence on School-Leavers

Waters and McAlpine (2016) postulate that the career advisors maintain stereotypical perceptions of the skilled trades in the construction industry, including low pay and hard work. In the UK, a survey published by the CITB (2014) highlighted that 35% of career advisors and teachers view a career in the construction industry as unattractive. Therefore, the career advisors' negative views of skilled trades could prevent school-leavers from entering the construction sector. Furthermore, a survey conducted in Ireland by Dr Róisín Murphy established that only 16% of the apprentices confirmed that guidance teachers steered them towards an apprenticeship program, while 79% of the apprentices asserted that such encouragement did not come from career advisors (Murphy, 2020). In addition, the Association of Colleges (2012) established that 82% of teachers lack the knowledge to advise school-leavers about career opportunities in the construction industry while 44% self-confessed to giving ill-informed advice (CITB, 2014). Conversely, the Educating the Educators report (2012) argues that teachers and career advisors are mindful of the gap in knowledge and have sought assistance to resolve it (Waters & McAlpine, 2016).

3 Research Methodology

The primary research question of this study was: 'Why are school-leavers pursuing a higher education degree rather than joining a skilled trade in Ireland?' The main objective of this study was to examine the key influences on school-leavers' decision to pursue a career path in the construction industry through either a higher-level degree or a skilled trades program upon their completion of secondary school in Ireland. A mixed methods research method with triangulation was used to increase the validity of the quantitative and qualitative research findings (Dawson, 2019).

3.1 School-Leavers Questionnaire

A quantitative research approach was used to collect data from school-leavers. Quantitative research can be conducted through using questionnaires to identify the opinions that people attribute to key events, such as making a career choice (Fellows and Liu, 2008). The quantitative research design was based on a purposive sampling technique by selecting 200 predominantly 6th year (school-leavers) and some 5th year students aged between 16 and 18 years old, across four secondary schools in the Wicklow and Wexford areas in Ireland. The questionnaires comprised of primarily closed-ended questions with pre-populated answer choices for the respondent to choose from, to collect data about their reasons for pursuing a higher-level degree compared to joining a skilled trades program in Ireland. Close-ended responses enable the researcher to collect consistent data (Wolff, 2021). The questions ranged from introductory questions about their school year and gender to more specific questions on career and education influences, the availability of information on career paths and interest in undertaking an apprenticeship. A pilot questionnaire was performed initially to optimize the answer choices. The final question in the questionnaire was an open-ended question to solicit the school-leavers to provide additional feedback in their own words. The questionnaires could be administrated to school-leavers via an online link or a QR code to maximise participant engagement.

3.2 Key Influencers Semi Structured Interviews

A qualitative research approach was used to collect data from the key influencers surrounding the school-leavers and their impact on the career choices by school-leavers upon their completion of secondary school in Ireland. The primary key influencers considered for this study comprised the school-leavers' parents, teachers, and career advisors (Twumasi et al., 2018). The perspective of the key influencers on construction related trades was assessed through semi-structured interviews. The primary objective of the semi-structured interviews was to obtain an in-depth opinion from the key influencers about the school-leavers career choices (Dawson, 2019)

4 Findings and Analysis

The research findings include the results from the interviews with a Head of Apprenticeships, two researchers in the area of apprenticeships, two apprentices and a career guidance teacher as well as the results from the questionnaire completed by 200 5th students and 6th year school-leavers.

4.1 Student Survey Summary

The school-leavers indicated that the biggest influence upon deciding their career path after secondary school is their parents (53.5%) ahead of others, friends, and career advisors. The school-leavers also highlighted that following secondary school, 75% were encouraged towards higher education courses, while only 6% of the school-leavers were encouraged towards skilled trades or apprenticeships. This is a similar finding to the number of actual students that progress onto higher education, which is 65% of students as noted by Mooney (2021).

Most school-leavers pointed out that they were given more information about college courses (79%), while only 1% of school-leavers said they received more information about skilled trades or apprenticeship courses. As a result, 69% of school-leavers believed that higher education is considered as the superior pathway for school-leavers and 80% of respondents confirmed they were planning on going to higher education. Only 11% of the school-leavers were considering pursuing a skilled trades or apprenticeship program. Incidentally, 47% of school-leavers would consider entering an apprenticeship program should they fail to get into their chosen higher education course. 80% of the respondents highlighted that the majority of information days were aimed at third-level degree courses. Only 1% of the respondents confirmed that any of the open days were for apprenticeship programs.

Interestingly, 38% of school-leavers believed that a construction related trade was believed to be a viable option and the same percentage believed that it was not a viable option. The remaining 24% said it may be a viable option. 80% of the school-leavers are planning to go to higher education upon completion of secondary school. Only 11% of the school-leavers are considering doing a skilled trades or apprenticeship program after secondary school. Yet, 46% of the school-leavers indicated that they may be more interested in apprenticeship programs, since they are included as a CAO option. 23% of the school-leavers are more interested in apprenticeship programs now that it is a CAO option.

Overall, the school-leavers would rate the attractiveness of construction related trades a 2.93 out of 5. Based on the questionnaire administrated, the school-leavers believe that their influencers would rate construction related trades a 3.02 out of five.

4.2 Key Influencers Interviews Summary

The findings from the interviews with key influencers suggest that choosing apprenticeship programs after secondary school might be seen as a failure by school-leavers and would only really be for uneducated people. One key influencer highlighted that "… apprenticeship is still regarded by many as a pathway for those who just weren't good enough to go to university, which is terrible". Several key influencers put forward that apprenticeship programs don't receive a positive press and that negative stereotypical images are still associated with these programs. These findings from the interviews correlate with the statistics from Waters and McAlpine (2016) and CITB (2014) which include the low scores that parents and career advisers give the construction industry as a career choice

Similarly, most of the key influencers agreed that skilled trades and apprenticeships programs are being undersold in secondary schools. One key influencer suggested that "… there is a push for degrees in higher education as opposed to apprenticeship programs." In general, the key influencers concurred that in secondary schools there was a lack of information provided to school-leavers about skilled trades or apprenticeships programs compared to information about higher education options. Miller (2016) established in his study that only 48% of students surveyed received information on apprenticeship programmes.

During conversations about whether career advisors and teachers are aware of the opportunities that apprenticeship programs offer, the findings indicate that the key influencers do not believe the opportunities are being offered as a viable option to school-leavers. Many of the key influencers agreed that career advisers and teachers need to learn more about the potential opportunities that skilled trades and apprenticeship programs can offer to school-leavers. This is in keeping with the findings of Association of Colleges (2012) whereby 82% of teachers lack knowledge on careers in the construction industry. The key influencers believe that the main sources of advice for school-leavers are the career advisers and the parents.

Based on the opinions of the interviewees, guidance counsellors should be the main source of advice about the career path options post-secondary school. However, parents are expected to be a strong influence on the decision-making process. This would suggest that it is crucial to educate parents on the career path options after secondary school.

Apprenticeship programs are frequently associated with the 'old shovel and spade' jobs. One key influencer explained that he went originally through the apprenticeship system himself and hopes to complete a PhD study by summertime. Two other key influencers realised that after two years of college it did not suit them. One other key influencer highlighted that students should receive the correct information about the course options after completing secondary school.

5 Discussion and Recommendations

If school-leavers continue to refrain from entering the construction industry through skilled trades or apprenticeship programs, there could be significant consequences for the construction industry and ultimately the economic output of Ireland. Options and recommendations are discussed for consideration by the construction industry and the government to address the skills shortage issue.

The research found that school-leavers received very little information about skilled trades and apprenticeship programs and generally students in secondary schools receive more information about higher education course options. However, with limited information available for school-leavers about skilled trades and apprenticeship programs it is apparent that higher education has become the 'superior pathway' and desired goal for school-leavers in Ireland. School-leavers should, and have begun to request adequate information about apprenticeship programs as an equal option to a higher education path. For example, there could be a specific government or sectoral agency that coordinates school visits, talks and open days in secondary schools to inform school-leavers about the apprenticeship options and career opportunities in the construction industry.

More can also be done by the construction industry and government to improve the perception and attractiveness of the construction industry. This can be done by suitably educating parents, teachers and career advisors about the opportunities and the benefits of career paths in the construction industry. More information should be provided to both school-leavers and the key-influencers about skilled trades and apprenticeship programs to avoid these options being 'undersold.' The recent introduction of skilled trades and apprenticeship programs on the CAO system can make a difference in presenting the available options to school-leavers.

In addition, it should be made clear to school-leavers that entering skilled trades and apprenticeship programs does not mean you can't grow any further, but in fact offer excellent career opportunities and subsequent into the construction industry. For example, a school-leaver can start as an apprentice and progress all the way up to level 10 (PhD) on the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland. In addition, apprenticeships allow school-leavers to learn quickly in a real-life work environment while also earning a wage.

The study concludes that adequate information and benefits should be presented to school-leavers about the study pathways and career opportunities into the construction industry. Furthermore, a better more effective mechanism must be put in place that can benefit school-leavers, apprentices as well as the employers in the construction industry. Lastly, there is a need for a collaborative approach between the industry and government bodies to improve the current state and structure of skilled trades and apprenticeship programs.

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