

Chapter 11

Work Integrated Learning and Construction Project Management: A Case Study of an Industry– Academia Partnership in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter concerns the design, delivery and management of a unique part-time postgraduate MSc in Construction Project Management (MScCPM) programme through an industry-academia partnership in Ireland during the period 2007-2010. The partners are BAM Contractors, part of the wider Royal BAM Group based in The Netherlands, and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). There are many innovative Work Integrated Learning (WIL) aspects to this bespoke programme, including the blending of teaching and assessment by both WIT lecturers and senior BAM staff. There is also a blend of traditional classroom activities and e-learning technologies to suit the geographically dispersed participants. All stakeholders in this programme have benefited from their participation. These benefits and the associated lessons learned are described in the hope that they may be of use to those developing WIL postgraduate programmes in the future.

INTRODUCTION

This Chapter reviews the bespoke two-year part-time postgraduate MSc in Construction Project

Management programme (MScCPM) for a leading construction company in Ireland. It is an example of a successful Industry-Academia partnership that incorporates ‘Work Integrated Learning’. The two partners are Waterford Institute of Technol-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-547-6.ch011

ogy (WIT) and BAM Contractors, a member of the Royal BAM Group. The time-frame under review for this Case Study is 2007 to 2010 which essentially breaks down into three phases:

- **September 2007 to May 2008:** Programme design and approval;
- **June 2008 to May 2009:** Year 1 preparation, implementation and review;
- **June 2009 to September 2010:** Year 2 preparation and implementation.

The economic context to the past three years has been extremely difficult for many countries in the world and this has been particularly true for Ireland. The impact of the recession on the Irish Construction Industry and the Irish Higher Education Sector has been very significant. While all stakeholders are devising strategies to cope with the short-term challenges there are also other medium to long-term issues to be accommodated.

There are a number of challenges that are facing the construction industry and higher education. Many of these challenges are driven by the need for change. These changes are forced upon us often due to changes in government policies, society and culture, making it harder to strike the balance between the educational methods of delivery and meeting the demands of a highly competitive construction industry. This challenges higher educational providers and curricular developers to bridge the gap between academia and industry, which is often proven difficult, particularly in view of the rapid changes due to the arrival of new technologies and economic cycles which continue to challenge the construction industry.

All construction organizations will need to continuously improve if they are to survive and prosper and central to achieving such improvements is 'learning'. The combination of current economic and other influences is encouraging individuals to step-up their knowledge and qualifications. In Ireland and elsewhere there is a growing realization of the need for professional and managerial

staff to have postgraduate qualifications. While learning doesn't necessarily have to involve qualifications there are many advantages to both employees and employers. Qualifications for an individual can fulfill a personal desire and in most cases enhance their career opportunities. The need for construction client groups to be assured that they are giving work to the best company is also a major factor in encouraging employers to enhance the qualifications of their employees. The challenge for enlightened companies is therefore to attract, retain and develop their employees' learning and qualifications, while continuing to use their talents on live projects.

Lifelong learning programmes aimed at people in the workplace must be suited to their particular needs (Davey et al., 2004). Within the construction industry the difficulty that exists with respect to undertaking post-graduate programmes has been somewhat addressed by the latest evolution/trend among educational providers to broaden access by offering subjects as modules or blocks that can be packaged up as short courses (Cole, 2004).

In parallel to companies improving their learning, the higher education sector globally in recent years, and certainly in Ireland, is actively seeking stronger links with industry. Many of these links are being encouraged by government, particularly with an emphasis on research and development. The influence in Europe of the EU's policies on 'lifelong learning' is also significant. 'Work Integrated Learning' is therefore a growing issue for both industry and academia and the boundaries between the two are blurring. Lees (2009) summarized the current situation nicely by stating *'the message is clear; engagement between industry and higher education in the built environment is not optimized and needs to be improved. The debate about whether to take action is over; now we must determine how to change.'*

The specific objectives of this Case Study chapter are to:

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