

EducationGuardian Further

If the overalls fit

Colleges report a sharp increase in people signing up to learn a trade, and a lot of the recruits are women

Louise Tickle

Remember the joke, “how many women does it take to change a lightbulb?” Well, forget the old punchline. The new answer appears to be “just one, and she’ll charge you a £40 callout fee”.

Colleges are reporting a sudden upsurge in students signing up to learn how to be an electrician, decorator, mechanic or builder, and much of the increase seems to be down to female students. Far more women are now choosing to train in these trades, rejecting the more traditionally “female” roles of hairdresser, childminder, care worker or beautician.

“Welding and fabrication is absolutely booming,” says Andy Dawson, assistant director of manufacturing and technology at Preston College. All his welding courses are full and he’s recently had to put on two more – also running at capacity.

Overall applications for Preston College’s mechanical engineering and electrical engineering courses are up 50% on 2010. Bournemouth and Poole college has 17% more enrolled on painting and decorating courses this year compared with last, and Harlow College is this year processing more than double the number of applications for painting and decorating it received for entry in September 2010.

Ask students why they’re choosing to train for these jobs and the answer, Harlow principal Colin Hindmarsh, says, is that “these students are thinking about their future and doing something about it”.

“The labour market for the under-24s looks grim. We’re finding that our students are becoming more entrepreneurial, they want to be in charge of their own destiny



Apprentice painter and decorator Kerry Isom likes the work for its creativity, and recently won Johnstone’s young painter of the year

and these sorts of vocational courses allow them to set up their own businesses. They can be self-employed and self-reliant.

“In the current climate, without getting a high-level qualification in a trade like welding, they don’t think they will get a job,” says Dawson.

The rapid rise in the cost of a degree may well be playing a part, says Michael Grange at Derby College. “With universities charging higher fees, we seem to be

attracting the better students; certainly the ones who apply have better qualifications and are more focused.”

“We’ve had a significant increase in the number of women on this kind of course,” says Hindmarsh, “most noticeably in painting and decorating. At level 2, two thirds of our students are female.”

At Bournemouth and Poole College, head of construction Mark Loose says the number of women doing painting and decorating is up by 30%. At Preston college, Dawson says that whereas a few years ago six or seven girls might have done welding and fabrication and motor vehicle courses, this year it’s 40 to 50. Newcastle college has taken on its first female scaffolding apprentice, and hopes more will apply.

For Kerry Isom, 22, just finishing her second year as a painting and decorating apprentice at Bournemouth and Poole College, the motivation comes from the creativity she can bring to her work, and job satisfaction. Currently employed by her local

council and doing one day a week at college, Isom’s work is, says her tutor, “exceptional”, and won her the Johnstone’s young painter of the year award last October.

“I wasn’t sure about the job prospects at first,” she says. “But I like the fact you’re not behind a desk, and you can see what you’ve done. Painting’s quite relaxing!”

Isom wants to travel and knows she’s got a skill that will make her good money around the world.

Ruth Brough, 49, is currently studying to be a plumber and renewables installer with New Career Skills. Changing careers and looking to “make the most of the rest of my working life” she hopes she has discovered a market niche where she can work in the practical way she enjoys, and help people live the greener lifestyle she believes in.

Plumbers and electricians are now having to get to grips with green technologies and more stringent health and safety regulations, says the chief executive of New Career Skills, Steven Wines – an evolution

that may be attracting more women as the perception of traditional trades changes from blue collar to “green collar”.

Wines also notes that female plumbers or electricians have an interesting market advantage: hiring a woman for work in the home can be reassuring for older people, or women living alone, which, he says, “creates a niche for a female tradesperson”.

But are there jobs to be had in sectors that have always employed men and may be reluctant to take on a woman, no matter how well qualified? According to Tony Iyock, head of construction at Tresham College, “the opportunities need more advertising from the construction industry.”

The informal way in which recruitment often happens in vocational trades still prevents women getting jobs in significant numbers, says Linda Clarke, professor of European industrial relations at Westminster University. “If you go into colleges, there’s a far higher proportion of women training than you’ll find actually working in the labour market,” she says. “And I don’t see that changing very much.”

Competency not gender

However at Newcastle College, Colin Stott, director of the National Construction Academy, says that in his experience, companies are more interested in someone’s competencies than their gender. “Many [women] have had success as finalists in national competitions and the majority have found employment following completion of their course,” he says.

Dawson confirms this: “Particularly in motor vehicle, females are as good if not better. And their work ethic is often very good. They seem to be more rational about doing the tasks and, particularly in the 16-18 age range, a bit more mature. They’re more methodical and are very keen.”

Says Loose: “They have proved to be more competent decorators than the boys – often their drawing skills are better, their attention to detail, and they’re much calmer. Girls tend to get to a higher level. They have done particularly well in the last three years.”

The pay for some trades is a far cry from the relatively low earnings of childminders, care workers and beauty therapists. Welders involved in the construction of the BBC’s new Manchester home world, says Dawson, be “earning between £30,000 and £50,000”. And plasterers, says Grange, can pull in £650 a week.

Stott points out that these days he’s also able to recruit female tutors, which, in turn, transforms the career expectations of all students, male and female.