

Twelve months in focus

Contributed by Richard Beamish, 2007

Richard Beamish looks forward to the coming year's agenda at Asset Skills, FM's sector skills council. What is the significance of the National Occupational Standards?

What is Asset Skills doing to further the profile FM?

Two themes will define the scope of Asset Skills' activity within the FM industry over the next 12 months. Firstly, we will complete and implement key frameworks for training provision throughout the UK. Secondly, we will work to improve the profile of both the FM industry itself and of Asset Skills within it.

Clear frameworks in action: National Occupational Standards

Our strategic aim is to complete the National Occupational Standards (NOS), on which vocational qualifications are based, and have them approved by the regulatory authority. We are currently at the first phase of the standards development and will be consulting on them in the summer.

The framework will integrate FM-specific content into a wide array of existing skills, including communication, and health and safety and management. Under the supervision of Asset Skills Head of Standards and Qualifications Penny Dawson, progress is well underway and we are confident of completion within the coming year.

It is against the NOS that we will consider the current training provision for FM at both further education and higher education levels. With the NOS completed and recognised, our first project will be to finalise the Foundation Degree in Facilities Management that has been in development.

The Foundation Degree sits as a precursor to a full degree, covering both core and specialist skills. Making extensive use of vocational training as well as academic learning, the Foundation Degree will best suit full-time study and promises to create the next generation of FM leaders.

A vital area of our activity over the coming year will be identifying and liaising with those employers who have the demand for this level of expertise. We will determine whether these businesses are able to offer the spaces for the vocational, on-the-job elements of the degree.

For the 14-19-year-old age group we will also implement the Construction and Built Environment Diploma (CBE) over the next year. Structured over three levels, the CBE Diploma also incorporates both the specialist functional skills needed within FM, as well as basic core competencies.

Level 1 is aimed at young people making initial decisions about their working futures, with Level 3 equivalent to five GCSE A-C qualifications. We have been in close contact with many other organisations, such as Construction Skills, to ensure the BED offers a full and thorough grounding. Pending the recognition of the NOS for FM, the process will be complete and we can implement this exciting initiative.

We will also establish links between FM employers and the government-backed Train to Gain programme. Train to Gain is aimed at those with no qualifications whatsoever, and is designed to equip the candidate with the skills to qualify at NVQ Level 2. Most FM courses begin at NVQ Level 3 so it will be important to ensure that preparatory levels of FM-relevant skills are included throughout the programme. This will enable those finishing Train to Gain to move quickly into the industry.

Having established these frameworks, their implementation will be guided by employer demand. Our goal in developing these structures is to ensure that, if there is a demand for the training, it is delivered to the right standards and by the right people. Throughout the next year we will continue to listen to employers in order to ensure that level of delivery.

Listening to employer demand

At present, London has a huge demand for FM training. Fifty-seven per cent of all FM companies in the UK have their headquarters in the capital. But at the same time, Manchester and Sheffield are undergoing rapid expansion and development. Even large regional areas such as the M4 corridor and the South Coast are reporting an increased demand for FM skills.

Throughout next year it will fall to Asset Skills to establish the provision for this training. The Foundation Degree, Built Environment Diploma and the NOS (described above) will ensure that provision is up to the required standard.

Throughout our liaison with employers it has become evident that there is a strong demand for an FM apprenticeship. There is currently no provision for such a scheme, but employers have expressed a preference for apprenticeships

because of the value they deliver. Consequently they are willing to invest the necessary time and resources.

We are, therefore, developing an apprenticeship in FM, which will have the option of specialising in 'hard' or 'soft' FM. By using a modular structure built around a set of core FM skills, we will be able to deliver a tailored apprenticeship to employers whilst also offering choice to those looking to join the scheme.

Further initiatives

Working with industry partners, Asset Skills will seek to establish a 'skills academy' for FM if employers demonstrate their support. We submitted a bid for funding for a related sector and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has this under review. Previously submitted bids have been declined due to the diversity of FM.

With regard to those already in work, we will continue our development of career pathways. Asset Skills recognises that there is a wealth of senior personnel within FM with few or no formal qualifications. Like a great many people in the industry, they simply 'fell into' their roles. Their careers have developed organically and in a piecemeal fashion. As a result, there is no recognisable, repeatable path to FM success.

Asset Skills aims to rectify this by identifying the qualifications and experience needed to succeed. These must range from those wishing to enter the industry at the most basic level to professionals such as chartered surveyors wishing to move into FM. We will continue to identify and develop these career pathways to ensure that there are no undue barriers to entry into the industry.

Asset Skills will also have a key role to play in advising employers and other organisations on the possible impact on the FM industry of the Leitch report, published in December 2006. The report makes comment upon the provision and development of skills in industry and this includes FM. The report recommends that the UK:

"Commits to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020... this means doubling attainment at most levels of skill. Responsibility for achieving ambitions must be shared between Government, employers and individuals."

Asset Skills is ideally placed to interpret these recommendations and provide guidelines to FM employers, and we will be doing so over the coming year.

From the boardroom to the classroom: a sharper, higher profile

The second strategic area of Asset Skills' FM activity over the year is to improve and increase the profile of FM. We will raise awareness of FM to a greater spectrum of people including businesses, the potential workforce and other influential groups.

Our first target will be the boardroom: communicating the message that a strong FM strategy improves the bottom line. FM interacts with a wide variety of regulatory aspects such as fire prevention and health and safety. Best practice and improved training can deliver this compliance more cost-effectively.

We will make boards more aware of the role FM plays in developing corporate and social responsibility. The environmental 'green' agenda has become headline news and excellence in FM can make fast, demonstrable improvements to carbon footprints and reduce the impact of business activity upon the environment.

The Action FM Forum, of which Asset Skills is a founder member, is a key tool to promote this discussion. The meetings bring together business leaders, employers, training providers and other relevant parties. Throughout the next 12 months this will continue to drive FM onto the boardroom agenda.

Improving the appeal of FM to potential workers

We will also increase the profile of FM and promote FM as a career choice to the vital 14-19 year old age group, as well as those already working. This will primarily be achieved by our ongoing promotion of the vacancies and rewards offered by a career in FM.

We will continue our outreach to colleges, as well as our attendance at trade events. This will be reinforced by our interaction with trade and professional bodies, including the magazines and journals they publish.

We will also increase the profile of FM to other influential organisations and people such as careers advisors within secondary schools and universities. Careers advisors continually need an effective link to external parties such as employers or training providers. Asset Skills is ideally placed to provide this in the case of FM.

We will exploit this opportunity primarily by forming a close liaison with the Careers Service National Association (CSNA), driving awareness of and interest in the FM industry. The BED and Foundation Degree will feature heavily in this promotion.

Lastly, we will increase the profile of Asset Skills itself and the role it has to play within the FM sector. Our regular liaison

with employers, government, trade bodies and training providers keeps Asset Skills at the forefront of skills discussions within the sector. We must now build on this basis and proactively engage with the FM industry throughout the UK.

The next 12 months promises intense activity, bolstered by completed frameworks and close liaison with the major employers within the UK FM industry. Taking the National Occupational Standards and translating them into the Foundation Degree and Built Environment Diploma will open up many new avenues of recruitment into FM. A larger pool of FM opportunities will require a sustained effort to ensure training provision excellence.

Clarity and precision in the advice we give to FM employers, particularly around issues of compliance, new regulations and government reports will be vital. Equally, we must ensure the needs of employers are represented to governments. Most importantly, we must ensure the FM training provision throughout the UK continues to grow and is seen to do so.

About the author

Richard Beamish is Chief Executive of Asset Skills. Please visit www.assetskills.org