



## Scottish Electrical Charitable Training Trust (SECTT)

### Apprentice Early Leavers Study

Report on a study of Modern Apprentices who leave before completing their courses

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## Preface

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The Trustees of SECTT, as part of their continual overview of apprentice training in Scotland, engaged Pye Tait Limited to undertake research into the early leavers from the Electrotechnical Modern Apprenticeship Training Programme.

SECTT have determined that between 77% and 80% of those who start the apprenticeship move through the training and ultimately qualify as competent electricians. In addition, SECTT are aware that the greatest proportion of early leavers drop out of the industry within the first and second years of training. Typically between 8% and 9% of any one cohort leave in the first year, with slightly fewer leaving in the second year. Leavers in the third year are typically 4% and in the fourth and fifth years between 2% and 3%.

The broad assumption is that those who leave, particularly in the early stage of the apprenticeship, are ill-informed or disillusioned and, along with other early leavers, may be considered as *natural wastage* from the training programme. While this loss to the industry may constitute natural wastage SECTT recognise that even a small reduction in this loss would result in improved completion rates and raise the number of qualified electrotechnical operatives. In addition, SECTT acknowledge that every apprentice who leaves the training programme has effectively occupied an apprenticeship that may have benefited another young person.

For the reasons above, the Trustees of SECTT commissioned this research in order to assist them in strategies for improving apprentice completion rates, benefiting both young people coming into the apprenticeship and the Scottish Electrotechnical Industry as a whole.

## Methodological Note

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The research used a sample of 187 apprentices and employers of whom 50 were no longer in the industry. Very few of the sample – whether apprentices or employers – were available during normal working hours and this meant that we had to restrict almost all of the telephoning to a period between 6pm and 8pm at night

A friendly but professional approach from Pye Tait staff meant that detailed responses were obtained from 139 of this sample (74%).

Considering the difficulties inherent in attempting to contact and acquire information out of normal working hours, with a proportion of the sample having already left the sector, we feel that this is a creditable achievement.

In saying this, however, we feel bound to state that a great deal of the credit rests with the parents, apprentices and employers of whom the vast majority provided information, returned calls and clarified queries with the greatest good will and humour.

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*Note: Throughout this report, apprentices who have left the scheme before successful completion are referred to “early leavers” or “leavers”. Apprentices who have either successfully completed their training or are continuing to work toward completion are referred to as ‘stayers’.*

# 1. Introduction

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The Scottish Joint Industry Board (SJIB) is responsible for the only approved Electrical Contracting Apprenticeship in Scotland, and the Scottish Electrical Charitable Training Trust (SECTT) is responsible for the management of this training scheme.

As with all training providers and management organisations, SECTT has some apprentices each year who leave at various stages of the course, before their training is complete.

Although speculation is possible, the relative severity of this early leavers rate is unknown, as are the motivating factors for early leavers. SECTT therefore commissioned Pye Tait Limited to carry out a study to address these issues and to offer some recommendations to improve the current situation.

This report summarises the main findings, conclusions and recommendations. A separate statistical annex contains detailed results from the questionnaires.

## **Methodology**

### *Background Research – Overview*

In order to gain an accurate understanding as to why some apprentices leave the training scheme early and how severe this problem actually is, it is essential to understand both the nature of apprenticeship courses and the situation in other apprenticeship schemes. This was researched in a number of ways, but primarily through the internet (referring to sites such as The Scottish Executive's).

The staff of SECTT provided a significant amount of information regarding apprentice details and contact information for employers and apprentices. This information was handled within all requirements of the Data Protection Act and was extremely useful in both the development of the questionnaires and analysis of the resulting data.

### *Questionnaire Development*

The questionnaires for the telephone survey were developed separately for three distinct groups of respondents:

1. Apprentices who left the training scheme before completion: "early leavers"
2. Apprentices who are working towards completing their training or have already successfully done so: "stayers"
3. Employers associated with both groups of apprentices

**The questionnaires were developed against a number of possible reasons for apprentices leaving the scheme, including those factors suggested by SECTT in the initial project briefing (Figure 1).** All questionnaires were piloted and amended where necessary before full implementation of the survey.

**Figure 1 Possible Contributory Factors For Apprentice's Leaving Early As Suggested By SECTT**

- Possible reasons for Apprentice Drop-outs:
- Misleading information from schools prior to commencing apprenticeship
  - Unready for the world of work
  - Unsatisfactory pay and terms and conditions for work
  - College work too hard or too similar to school
  - No support or personality clashes with colleagues in the workplace
  - Work or job was not as expected
  - Another job opportunity arose
  - Decided to return to school or go to college
  - Prospects in industry were poorly perceived
  - Despite parental encouragement, career was not what apprentice really wanted to do

The additional data supplied by SECTT regarding the apprentices selected for the survey was incorporated into the database in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act and included: start and end date; date of birth; and pre-employment percentiles for numeracy and mechanical aptitude.

#### *Tele-survey*

Once the questionnaires were developed – one for employers and one for apprentices (the latter included sections for both leavers and stayers as well as a core of common questions) – over 770 telephone calls were made to 100 apprentices (50 leavers and 50 stayers) and 87 employers.

Establishing contact with some of the apprentices was difficult due to their work commitments and social life. However, once contact was made, the apprentices and their parents – like the employers – were extremely friendly and willing to help.

This cooperative attitude and refreshing approach to a telephone interview meant 65 employers and 74 apprentices (42 apprentices working toward completing their training and 32 early leavers) were interviewed in total.

#### *Analysis*

When an employer or apprentice was successfully interviewed, their answers were input into a database, which was specially created and developed for this survey. The database facilitated analysis and enabled the creation of tables and graphs to assist with statistical interpretation.

## 2. Employer Questionnaire – Findings

Employers are the cornerstones of any successful training scheme. They play a large role in training the apprentices and have significant contact with them throughout their three stages of training. One employer who was interviewed even visits his apprentices informally at college sometimes. For these reasons, and more, their perspectives on why some apprentices leave the scheme before completion were found to be particularly revealing.

### *Employers' History With SECTT*

The first stage of the employer questionnaire was designed to determine exactly how much experience employers have with both SECTT and apprentices. Contextually this is important in order to understand the working atmosphere that apprentices experience and the degree of experience that employers bring to bear on managing apprentices. Clearly, employers' "apprentice experience" is a possible contributory factor to some apprentices' decision to leave the course.

As is revealed in Table 1, over 61% of respondents have been taking on SECTT apprentices for ten years or more, while only 1.5% of employers have had one year or less with SECTT apprentices. Interestingly, no employers who have only employed stayers have been taking on apprentices for one year or less. The difference in profile between the two groups of employers is minimal – both are almost equally experienced in taking and managing apprentices.

**Table 1 Length Of Time Employers Have Been Taking Apprentices On**

Length Of Time	Percentage Of Respondents	Employers	
		Employed Early Leavers (%)	Employed only Stayers (%)
One year or less	1.5	3.2	-
Between one and five years	18.5	19.4	17.6
Between five and ten years	18.5	16.1	20.6
Ten years or more	61.5	61.3	61.8

Some 76.9% of employers describe their uptake of apprentices as '*continuous*'. This suggests that the majority of employers are both familiar with, and experienced in, the scheme. It also suggests to some extent that employers are therefore able to draw on their previous experiences to help present apprentices.

**This is supported by fact that almost half (47.7%) of employers have employed 16 or more apprentices over the years: it is likely that these employers have experienced lots of different personalities and abilities, and are well equipped to support present and future apprentices. (Table 2).**

**Table 2 Total Number Of Apprentices Employed**

Total Number Of Apprentices	Percentage Of Respondents	Employers	
		Employed Early Leavers (%)	Employed only Stayers (%)
One	1.5	3.3	-
Between two and five	15.4	10.0	21.9
Between six and ten	20.0	23.3	18.8
Between eleven and fifteen	10.8	16.7	6.3
Sixteen or more	47.7	46.7	53.1

From these results, it is possible to infer that the majority of employers not only have a long established relationship with SECTT but that they have an extremely informed perception of the apprenticeship course. Therefore, it seems unlikely that miscommunication between SECTT and employers, or fundamental employer experience, are significant causes for apprentices leaving.

#### *Apprentices In The Workplace*

As is revealed in Table 3, over half of respondents (51.5%) believe that apprentices have a slightly worse attendance record than other employees. Almost two-thirds of employers experience worse attendance from apprentices than they do from their other staff (64.0%).

**Table 3 Employers Ratings Of Apprentices' Work Attendance**

Rating	Percentage of Respondents	Employers	
		Employed Early Leavers (%)	Employed only Stayers (%)
Much better attendance rates than other employees	-	-	-
Slightly better than other employees	36.4	44.4	26.7
Slightly worse than other employees	51.5	38.9	66.7
Much poorer attendance than other employees	12.1	16.7	6.7

There does not appear to be an explanation for why 66.7% of employers who have only employed stayers rate their apprentices' attendance as slightly worse than other employees. However, it should be remembered that employers rated all their apprentices, not just early leavers and therefore the figures may not necessarily represent the overall situation.

**In spite of apprentices' worse attendance record, they appear to be well supported nonetheless: only 1.5% of employers offer no support to their apprentices (Table 4).**

**Table 4 Ways In Which Employers Support Apprentices**

Methods of Support	Percentage Of Responses	Employers	
		Employed Early Leavers (%)	Employed only Stayers (%)
Regular informal meetings	56.9	50.0	62.9
Assign a mentor/buddy	21.5	23.3	20.0
Regular formal meetings	20.0	26.7	14.3
No support offered	1.5	-	2.9

The most commonly cited method of support is '*meeting informally*', whereby the apprentice is simply '*asked how they are getting on*'. However, 20.0% of employers organise regular formal meetings with the apprentices: one firm assesses them quarterly through the 'Investors in People' scheme.

Employers who have had apprentices leave early organise regular formal meetings more frequently than employers who have only had stayers in their employment.

The main 'other' way in which employers support apprentices is to let them know that they can approach the boss (mainly in smaller companies) or the onsite foreman whenever they have a question. One firm even has an '*internal learning centre*' that apprentices are welcome to use if they are having problems understanding an aspect of the work or wish to learn more.

Internal assessors are used by 31.7% of employers to determine the abilities of their apprentices; the remaining 68.3% of employers use external assessors. Interestingly, 12.0% of respondents also assess apprentice skills during their company induction. This, combined with the seemingly high level of support accessible to apprentices in the workplace, suggests that the atmosphere provided is supportive and conducive to both learning and development: attributes that rarely influence people to leave.

#### *Employers' Experiences Of Early-Leavers*

When asked to estimate how many of their apprentices have left the scheme before completion over the last five years, 73.8% of respondents replied '*less than 10%*' (**Table 5**). Notably, many respondents who answered '*less than 10%*' also added that they had never had any of their apprentices leave. This supports the finding that, in the academic year 2002 to 2003, 93.6% of all apprentices who started training with SECTT successfully completed their stage of the course<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> SECTT 2002-03 Statistics

**Table 5 Proportion Of Early Leavers – Employers' Experience Over The Past Five Years**

Proportion of Apprentices leaving prior to completion	Percentage Of Respondents
Less than 10%	73.8
Between 11 and 20%	7.7
Between 21 and 40%	9.2
Between 41 and 60%	3.1
Between 61 and 80%	-
Between 81 and 100%	1.5

Of those employers that have had apprentices leave their training early, 60.9% gave them exit interviews. From these interviews and from general feedback the most important reason apprentices give for leaving early is that they found the technical college work too difficult (Table 6).

**Table 6 Common Feedback Employers Receive From Apprentices Who Leave Early**

Reasons	Percentage of Responses
Technical college work was too difficult	20.8
Another career/job opportunity arose	15.3
The apprentice was fired	15.3
Was not properly prepared for work	12.5
Practical work was too difficult	11.1
Felt pushed into scheme by relations/peers	9.7
College work was too much like school work	2.8
Pay was not satisfactory	2.8
Scheme was not as expected	2.8
Too much effort to travel to and from work	2.8
Decided to go back to school/college full time	1.4
Company went bankrupt/could not afford to keep apprentice on	1.4
Personality clashes with work colleagues	1.4

Over 15% of respondents have fired apprentices in the past and 12.5% replied that the apprentice *'was not properly prepared for work'*. The most commonly cited grounds for dismissal were laziness and a bad attitude to work. Although, it should be noted that these weaknesses were in the minority and most employers were extremely happy with apprentices' attitude and work ethic.

Table 6 also reveals that over 15% of apprentices inform employers that they left the course because another job opportunity arose. Yet, interestingly, not one employer mentioned an apprentice who felt that prospects in the industry were poor (an obvious potential reason for seeking new employment). However, 22.7% of employers mentioned that apprentices stated that they disliked the job.

Perhaps the best interpretation of this is that these apprentices, for whatever reasons, had already decided to leave the course and were simply waiting for another job opportunity to arise before leaving, rather than being lured away by better prospects.

This hypothesis seems to be reflected in the reasons to which employers attribute the loss of apprentices (Table 7).

Not one employer cited another job opportunity as a reason why apprentices leave. However, to a large extent, the other reasons to which employers attribute the loss of apprentices echoes the feedback they have received directly from the early leavers. For example, the difficulty of college work is cited by over 55% of employers as the real reason some apprentices leave their training – this is also the most common reason that apprentices themselves give for leaving. Employers frequently made comments such as:

*“he [the apprentice] didn't get any support from his [college] tutors and so fell behind”.*

**Table 7 Reasons to which employers attribute the loss of apprentices**

Reasons	Percentage Of Respondents
They can not cope with the academic college work	57.1
They do not have an accurate understanding of what they are getting into	38.1
They are not properly prepared for the world of work	26.2
They have a bad attitude to work	26.2
They can not cope with the practical work	9.5
We can not meet their pay expectations	7.1

It is interesting to note that 38.1% of employers feel that apprentices *'do not have an accurate understanding of what they are getting into'* and 26.2% feel *'they are not properly prepared for work'*. It is likely that these perceptions are linked to some extent. For example, it could be that - as a result of not understanding the course fully - some apprentices appear not to be properly prepared for the world of electrical work.

It is also important to remember that the majority of apprentices start the course immediately after finishing school and so it is their first real experience of work. Therefore, as some employers suggested, a brief trial period or some basic tuition before they start the course, may be efficacious in ensuring that apprentices do not leave for reasons that could have been determined before they started. A trial period would allow those apprentices who simply do not like the work to discover this earlier rather than later and thereby save SECTT, employers and apprentices' time and money.

#### *Early Leavers And Continuing Apprentices*

While it is important to establish the factors that influence some apprentices to leave, it is also imperative to understand why these factors influence some apprentices and not others.

Employers were asked to comment on what they feel are the main differences between those apprentices who leave early and those who complete the course and go on to become effective employees. There were three main differences given:

1. Early leavers generally have less motivation, enthusiasm and interest in the job
2. Apprentices who complete the course are normally more intelligent and able
3. Early leavers do not have the same level of commitment or as good an approach to working life as those that complete their training

These findings correspond with employers' perceptions of why apprentices leave and, to some extent, the feedback they receive from apprentices before they leave.

Employers were asked to rate the abilities and competence levels of apprentices who leave early on a scale of one to ten. (A 'ten' for extremely talented apprentices and a 'one' for apprentices who had very little or no talent in this field) - (**Table 8**).

The fact that there are various reasons for apprentices leaving the course before completion is evident in the spread of ratings. For example, although some apprentices struggle with the college work, practically they may be very able and so employers would give them a higher rating. Likewise, although some apprentices are fired or have a bad attitude, they may actually be reasonably talented electricians and so score an average rating.

**Table 8 Employer's ratings of early leavers' ability and competence levels**

Rating (One is lowest and ten is highest)	Percentage Of Respondents
1	11.6
2	16.3
3	14.0
4	11.6
5	20.9
6	9.3
7	11.6
8	4.7
9	-
10	-

#### *Employer Comments And Suggestions*

To conclude the questionnaire, employers were asked if they could suggest improvements to the training scheme and if they would like to make any comments. The responses were extremely helpful and detailed despite the fact that **67.8% of employers feel that the scheme is already fine** – 25.6% of that group of employers feel that there is *'not a problem with the course'* but that they just had *'the wrong apprentice'*. One employer stated that the scheme couldn't be improved and that they are:

***'exceptionally happy with SECTT' because the education is 'superb'.***

Nevertheless, despite being generally happy with the training scheme, most employers had suggestions for improving certain areas of the scheme. The suggestions mainly concerned four areas: college; funding and paperwork; pay; and the selection process.

#### College

Although employers describe their relationship with their apprentices' college as *'important'*, **30.5% of respondents feel that the relationship still needs improving**. According to the employers, improvements are necessary due primarily to a lack of communication. Many employers mentioned that:

***'if the tutors have a problem then the employers need to know immediately, not one week later... [especially] when it concerns attendance'.***

This desire for communication was revealed further when one employer stated that they had never had any *'advisors from the college getting in touch'*. However, another employer felt that his contact with the college was irrelevant because *'if the apprentice has a problem, it's talked through [directly] with the apprentice'.*

Meanwhile, one employer asserts that there are:

***'...some inconsistencies in the lecturers' reports. They say the apprentice is doing ok on a particular module but then conclude he is struggling'.***

He went on to add:

***'Perhaps lecturers are afraid of being too negative but that doesn't help the employer or apprentice'.***

However, a suggestion was made to combat this problem: employer and college forums in which they would all meet to discuss problems and plan future needs together with SECTT.

The need for joint planning was revealed again by a proposal that the scheme

***'should be determined by training officer and employer' because 'what is taught at college is not always relevant to work'.***

This concept was expanded by many other employers who feel that some of the *'modules taught are dated'* and so the *'scheme needs revamping'*.

In terms of the time spent at college, there was a mixed response; some employers feel that apprentices do not spend sufficient time at college, yet slightly more employers feel they spend too much time at college. However, there was consensus that perhaps a day release for college would be more efficacious to regularly consolidate what the apprentice is learning on-site and vice versa. For instance, one employer feels that

***'...some [apprentices] know how to do the job but can't apply it because of an initial lack of time on-site'.***

This may also inadvertently remedy some employers feeling, that although they are paying for them, they hardly see their apprentices during the first year.

#### *Funding And Paperwork*

In the words of one employer,

***'SECTT do a good job but need to sort funding out with the Enterprise Board... we had three apprentices complete the course in October 2002 but the paperwork means we've not received funding yet. Small firms may think twice if this isn't sorted'.***

Another employer reinforces this with his statement that *'there is far too much paperwork'*.

Meanwhile, a different employer feels that

***'Government funding isn't enough of an incentive to take on apprentices – [there is] too much red tape'.***

He is supported by another employer who thinks that *'the Government should help pay for [the apprentice's wage during] the first year'*.

### Pay

Many respondents mentioned the issue of apprentices' pay, albeit in totally different ways. While a minority of respondents felt that apprentices are paid too much, some felt that improved pay would make the course better.

However, **there was agreement that the rise in wages between the stages is too high and that perhaps the increase should be made with regards to the apprentices' level of competence.** One employer was particularly adamant that the pay rise in the third stage is *'not cost effective'* as the apprentice is only on two pounds a hour less than an electrician but they are *'not getting the same amount of work out of them [as an electrician]'*. Furthermore, this employer feels that the *'apprentices are getting a career out of it'* so pay at this stage is irrelevant.

### The Selection Process

With the exception of remarks regarding the college course, **the one aspect of the course, according to employers, which could be most improved is the selection process.** Respondents unanimously think that:

***[the selection test] is not very taxing at all'.***

Many are also concerned that some apprentices, who are selected, are not academically able enough to successfully complete the course.

Despite employers generally agreeing that a certain proportion of early leavers from any course is usual, they feel that SECTT should *'only take youngsters who are capable of academic work'* and who have *'a reasonable academic background – especially in maths'*. This could reduce the number of early leavers significantly.

#### **Summary**

- ❖ Over 60% of employers have been taking on SECTT apprentices for ten years or more
- ❖ Employers mainly support their apprentices through informal meetings
- ❖ Over 70% of employers have had less than 10% of apprentices leave their employment before their course was complete
- ❖ The main reasons employers think apprentices leave early is because they find the work too difficult
- ❖ Employers suggest four main areas for improvement within the scheme:
  1. College
  2. Funding and Paperwork
  3. Pay
  4. The selection process

### 3. Apprentice Questionnaire – Findings

To facilitate the determination of why some apprentices leave the training scheme before completion and in order to achieve a balanced set of results, current apprentices who are continuing with their training were interviewed as well as early leavers. The resulting information is documented below and offers some significant insights into some apprentices' reasons for not completing the course.

#### *Apprentices' Background*

Academically, the majority of apprentices start the scheme with at least six Standard Grades at grades three and above and very few have higher qualifications. Furthermore, 14.9% have qualifications other than Standard, Intermediate and Higher Grades. There do not appear to be any obvious differences in the amount of qualifications achieved by early leavers and stayers.

Interestingly, while 82.5% of those still on the course achieved a grade three or above for mathematics, only 46.9% of early leavers achieved the same. This is particularly interesting when it is compared to the pre-employment assessment percentiles (Table 9).

**Table 9 Mean Pre-Employment Assessment Percentage Scores**

	<b>Mean Numeracy Pre-Employment Percentage Score</b>	<b>Mean Mechanical Aptitude Pre- Employment Percentage Score</b>
Early Leavers	71.8	70.0
Apprentices continuing scheme	24.2	46.6

While almost half of all leave early achieve less than a grade three in Standard Grade Mathematics, they score significantly higher on their pre-employment assessment in numeracy and in mechanical aptitude than those still on the scheme. There is no apparent statistical explanation for this other than the sample size is small and so this may not be the trend over the whole apprentice population.

While the sample size may have influenced these findings, if this is not the case there must be some explanation for this statistical disparity. To identify the reasons for this disparity further research would be necessary.

However, the fact that there appears to be no correlation between Standard Grade results and the pre-employment assessment might point to problems with the efficacy of the entry test and possibly supports the employers desire for the selection process to be improved.

Only 6.9% of all apprentices have had any previous training with Skillseekers. However, it is unlikely that this in itself is a contributory factor to apprentices leaving the course because, for many, this is their first experience of work.

Therefore, it is more likely that the problem relates to the apprentice being unprepared for the world of work or not enjoying the job, rather than having no experience on such a scheme or finding the transition from work to study difficult.

#### *Prior to Training*

As is revealed in Table 10, when asked what encouraged them to work in the electrotechnical industry, a family member already in the industry influenced 33.3% of respondents. Another common response was that the apprentice was looking to learn a trade and they felt the electrotechnical industry offers job security and a good wage.

**Table 10 Factors that encourage people to apply to the training scheme**

Factors	Percentage Of Respondents	Early Leavers (%)	Stayers (%)
Family member already involved in the industry	33.3	32.0	34.9
Felt prospects in industry are good	27.5	32.0	25.6
Interested because of study (e.g. studied electronics at school)	18.8	12.0	23.3
Friends applied for training scheme	7.2	12.0	2.3
Like practical work (e.g. like working with hands)	4.3	8.0	2.3
Saw advertisement	4.3	4.0	4.7
Was recruited at a careers/recruitment fair	4.3	-	7.0

Almost one fifth (18.8%) of applicants pursued a place on the training scheme because their interest was stimulated by previous study. A larger proportion of those who stay on have been stimulated in this way.

57.6% of respondents got information about the scheme from their school or college.

Notably, 12.0% of early leavers were encouraged to apply for the training course because their friends did.

In terms of the quality of the information that apprentices receive about the scheme before starting,

81.7% of respondents rated it '*good – reasonably informative and honest*' and 9.9% rated it '*excellent – very informative and honest*'.

This reveals that, on the whole, apprentices feel reasonably well informed before they start the course especially as early leavers and stayers mainly concurred on these ratings.

*At Work*

While 50.7% of respondents found the work *'pretty much as expected'*, 26.0% stated that the work was *'not at all like I expected'*. Superficially, this appears to contradict apprentices' positive ratings of the quality of information received. However, when asked how the work differed from their expectations, it is apparent that this is not necessarily a negative statistic as 29.7% of apprentices find the work *'more interesting'*. Furthermore, 6.8% of respondents felt that the *'work is better'* because of a *'more friendly workplace'* or even simply stated *'it's just different – good different'*.

Notably, **42.9% of apprentices find the theory work harder than expected** – perhaps this correlates fairly closely to the fact that 30.4% of respondents attained grade four or less in Standard Grade Mathematics.

Of apprentices that found the theory work harder than expected, 50.0% were early leavers and 50.0% are stayers. **However, all apprentices who found the course 'boring' were early leavers.** Rather than this being a significant reason for some apprentices leaving early, perhaps this is more a reflection of the academic ability of some apprentices.

In terms of pay, over 70% of respondents rate it as *'pretty good'* or *'fairly good'*. (Table 11). Although 16.4% of apprentices rate the pay as *'poor'*, this is generally regarding the first year's pay and the consensus seems to be that the improvement in the second and third stages is good. One apprentice mentioned that any pay was good considering that if he were at university or college, he would not receive any pay for studying. However, some apprentices did point out the possible financial difficulties for apprentices who are supporting themselves.

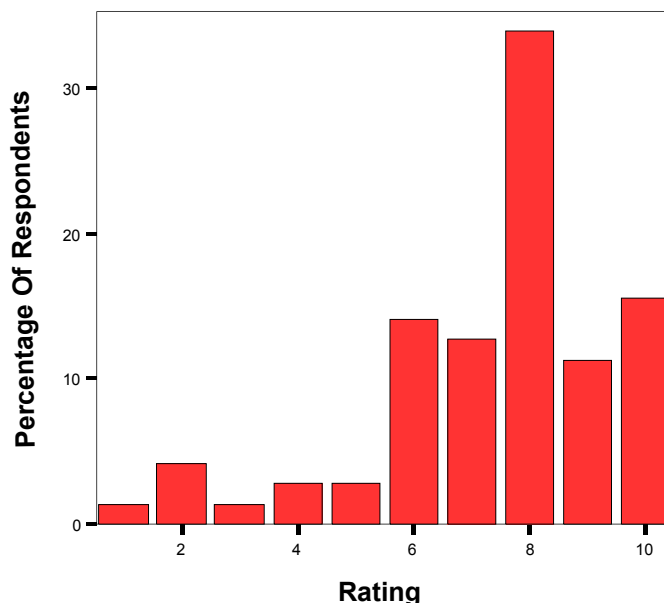
**Table 11 Apprentices' rating of pay**

Rating	Percentage Of Respondents
Excellent	10.9
Pretty Good	50.7
Fairly Good	21.9
Poor	16.4

In the workplace, apprentices were asked to rate how well supported they are by their employer, immediate boss, colleagues and training officer on a scale of 'one' to 'ten'. ('Ten' was awarded if the apprentice feels *'extremely well supported'* and a 'one' indicates that the apprentice has *'no support'*).

*The results suggest that apprentices are well supported in the workplace, as the most common rating in all categories, was 'eight' (Graph 1). Moreover, 83.3% or more apprentices awarded ratings of 'six' or more in each category, and in terms of support from their family; 'ten' was the most frequent rating.*

**Graph 1 - Apprentices' Ratings Of Their Employer**



The positive attitude towards colleagues was extended to other apprentices too as *95.2% of respondents cited that 'on the whole, the apprentices [working] alongside me are/were helpful and supportive'*.

Some 62.5% of respondents work with apprentices in the same stage as themselves and 73.6% work with apprentices in different stages to themselves. Generally, the apprentices enjoyed working in the same company as other apprentices.

*At College*

Apprentices were asked how the college part of the course related to their memories of being at school and encouragingly only 4.3% of apprentices felt it *'was a bit too much like being at school'*.

**Table 12 How Apprentices Feel College Relates To School**

How College And School Relate	Percentage Of Respondents
College is a bit like school	48.6
College is not at all like school	41.4
College is exactly the same as being back at school	5.7
College is a bit too much like being at school	4.3

83.6% of apprentices had no problem with their perceived differences or similarities between college and school (Table 13) despite 58.6% of apprentices feeling that college is like school to some degree.

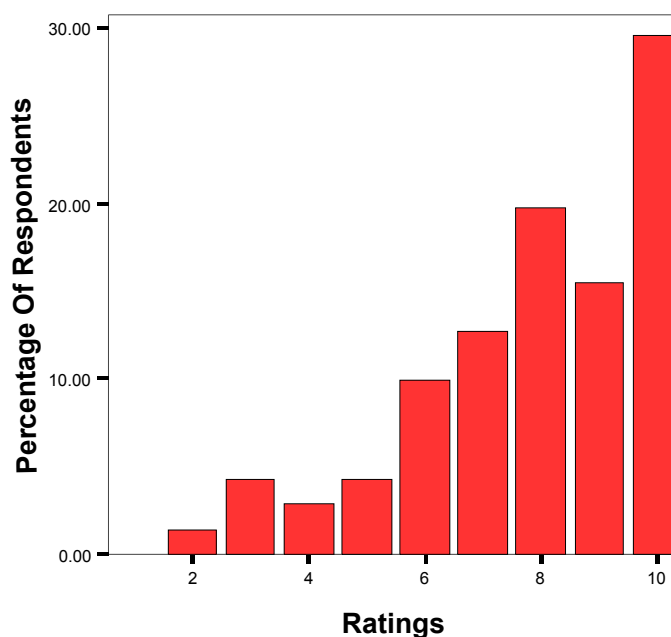
**Table 13 Do apprentices' have a problem with their perceived differences between school and college?**

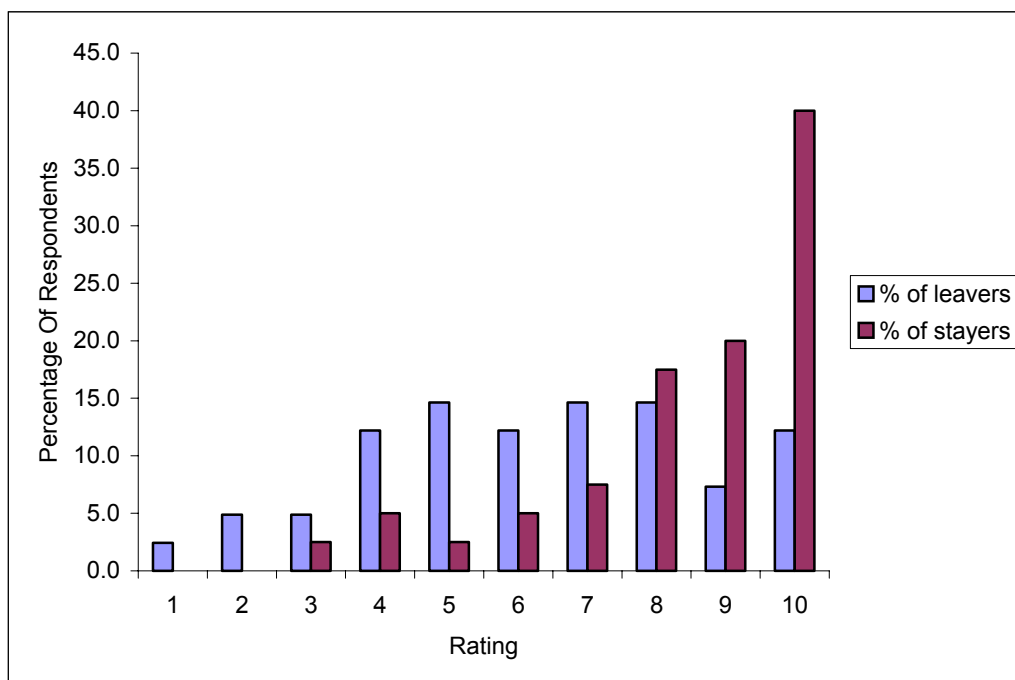
Problem With Perceived Differences	Percentage Of Respondents
No	83.6
Yes	16.4

The apprentices were also asked to rate their college tutors and the other college students on the same scale. ('Ten' was awarded if the apprentice feels *'extremely well supported'* and a 'one' indicates that the apprentice has *'no support'*).

While 77.1% of respondents awarded their fellow college students 'seven' or above, **the college tutors were awarded a 'ten' by 29.6% of apprentices** (Graph 2). Notably this high opinion of tutors was particularly from stayers and early leavers had a more varied opinion of their tutors (Graph 3). However, some apprentices gave the tutors a high score but elaborated by stating that this was only for their *'best'* tutor and it did not necessarily reflect how supportive all their tutors are.

**Graph 2 Apprentices' ratings of their college tutors**



**Graph 3 Early leavers and stayers' ratings of their college tutors**

### *Travel Arrangements*

One possible cause of difficulty for apprentices is travel. Respondents were asked whether they find or found getting to work or college a problem. Although only 4.2% of respondents state that getting to college is difficult, over one fifth (22.2%) find getting to work somewhat problematic.

There was consensus over two primary reasons for travel problems:

1. Distance (52.9%)
2. Time (47.1%).

Also, 29.4% cited the expense of travel as a problem. One apprentice said that in a three week block at college he spends

***'£90 on petrol but only get[s] £60 back – that's a lot of money to be short on wage'***

Apprentices who use public transport often find travelling to work or college hard. In one case, an apprentice has to get a bus for 70 minutes and then still has *'quite a long walk to get to work'*. However, the majority of apprentices manage to arrange lifts with colleagues or relations to overcome this difficulty.

### *Early Leavers*

Having attained a relatively balanced set of results regarding apprentices' opinions on various facets of the course, it was then important to consider, in isolation, the thoughts of apprentices who leave the scheme before completion. This should provide much clearer insights into some apprentices' reasons for leaving early.

While 56.3% of apprentices who leave the scheme before completion do so in stage one, 28.1% leave in stage three.

For example, one employer reported the case of an apprentice who failed the final exam twice despite having had four and a half years experience working with the company. This experience was quite common: for instance, another employer was concerned with the way in which some apprentices fail an exam and so *'lose heart and then interest'*. This employer felt there was a definite need for more feedback on exam results, especially if the apprentice failed.

From Table 14, it can be seen that the three main reasons, given by apprentices for leaving the scheme before completion, correspond with the feedback that employers receive and, to some extent, the reasons that employers believe are contributory factors. Furthermore, all concur that **travel and a decision to return to study are not major motivating factors for apprentices to leave early.**

In cases involving problems such as attendance related issues, perhaps the fact that some apprentices find the theory work too challenging and so lose interest, influences their level of attendance. In one apparently extreme case, an apprentice reported that he was fired for not attending work.

**Table 14 Reasons Early Leavers Give For Leaving The Scheme Before Completion**

Reasons	Percentage of Responses
Technical work was too difficult	12.9
The college work was too much like school work	5.7
Another career/job opportunity arose	5.7
Personality clashes with work colleagues	5.7
No support from work colleagues	5.7
Practical work was too difficult	4.3
Pay was unsatisfactory	4.3
Information received was misleading	4.3
Felt pushed into scheme by relations/peers	4.3
Travelling was too much effort	4.3
Company went bankrupt/couldn't afford to keep apprentice on	2.9
Scheme was not as expected	2.9
Length of travel to college	2.9
Expense of travel to work	2.9
Length of travel to work	2.9
Decided to go back to school/college full time	1.4
Thought prospects in industry were poor	1.4
Apprentice was fired	1.4
<i>Other</i>	24.3

The 'other' reasons apprentices cited for leaving their training early primarily concern their experiences at college:

- *'College tutors were patronising'* or unsupportive; in one case a dyslexic apprentice felt that his tutors *'didn't seem to care it could affect [his] studies'*.
- An equal proportion of early leavers cited personality clashes with their boss or work colleagues
- Some apprentices experienced difficulties because *'work on-site was totally different to college work'*.

The careers that early leavers are now pursuing are varied:

20.0% are on another training scheme or back at school or college;  
10.0% are in the armed forces;  
13.3% are in labouring or construction; and  
23.3% are unemployed.

When early leavers were asked how, and indeed if, their life has improved since leaving the course, a third answered that *'it is the same'*. However, 12.5% feel their life has improved, as they are *'not depressed anymore'*. This depression stemmed mainly from the academic difficulties that some apprentices faced. Meanwhile, **15% of early leavers feel that leaving the scheme was a mistake because they 'lost a good career'**.

In terms of pay, 58.6% of apprentices who left the scheme before completion are now earning more<sup>2</sup>. Also, the fact that 41.4% of apprentices are now earning less supports, to some extent, the findings that pay is not a motivating factor for apprentices to leave the course – most apprentices recognise that at the end of the three stages, they will have secured a good means of income for the rest of their lives.

#### *Comments And Suggestions From All Apprentices*

To conclude the questionnaire, apprentices were asked if they could suggest improvements to the training scheme and whether they would like to make any comments.

Overall, apprentices were extremely positive about the training course:

**38.3% of respondents feel the scheme is 'top-notch' and are 'really enjoying it'.**

One apprentice even said that *'it is perfect as it is'* and has recommended it to his *'footy mates'*.

Nonetheless, some apprentices did feel that it *'possibly could be improved'*. The suggestions that apprentices made mainly concerned two areas: college and the relationship between apprentices' college and work.

#### College

In terms of improvements to the college side of the course, the relationship with their tutors appears to be problematic for quite a few of the respondents.

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<sup>2</sup> Of early leavers, 56.3% left in Stage one when the pay is lowest.

However, the way in which the relationship is problematic seems to vary. Generally, apprentices feel that tutors either *'get annoyed having to repeat the same information to every student'* or *'expect you to know everything with not enough time to prepare'*.

However, the severity of this situation is difficult to establish because, despite these comments, it should be remembered that tutors were rated *'extremely supportive'* by 29.6% of apprentices.

Another issue that apprentices are concerned about is the amount of time they spend in college – but there is no consensus as to whether less or more time would be more efficacious.

While 11.7% of respondents feel that they need more tuition and theory work, 18.3% of apprentices feel that *'you learn more onsite'*. Nevertheless, there was agreement that it would be beneficial to do more supervised practical work at college, if the problem of the expense of materials could be solved.

#### Relationship Between College And Work

Interestingly, apprentices echoed their employers desire for more communication between their workplace and their college. The need for greater levels of interaction is highlighted by a number of apprentices' experiences. For instance, one early leaver

***'...would like to have continued but his employer lost patience because he thought I wasn't learning anything. But what I was learning at college wasn't relevant to my job'.***

Furthermore, another apprentice wants *'more help from lecturers'* and especially *'more feedback and information'* regarding performance and levels of attainment.

Moreover, 10% of respondents felt that SECTT should *'check out employers first to know what they can offer the apprentice'*. This would then help stop apprentices finding themselves, for example, *'studying electrical installation at college but alarm fitting at work'* and feeling that, although it may sound similar, *'it's totally different'*.

#### Other Comments

There were a few apprentices' comments that, although the opinion was in the minority, may still provide some relevant insights into why some apprentices leave the course before completion.

The first comment was that the

***'The initial test should be harder. Sometimes college moves too fast and there's no chance to catch up'.***

Furthermore, one early leaver felt that if the selection test was harder and if he had a *'proper introduction, I'm sure I'd have decided the course wasn't for me'*.

These suggestions concur with the employers desire for a more difficult selection test and one employer's suggestion that a short video on the industry would be a good introduction for new apprentices.

### Summary

- ❖ Interestingly, early leavers score, on average, higher in the pre-employment assessment test than apprentices still on the scheme.
- ❖ Having a family member already in the industry encouraged 33.3% of apprentices to apply.
- ❖ Pay is rated as 'good' by 50.7% of respondents.
- ❖ Those that find travelling to work and college problematic cited distance and time as causing the most difficulty.
- ❖ Most early leavers leave in stage one.
- ❖ The main reason given for dropping out is that the technical college work is too hard.
- ❖ The careers that early leavers are now pursuing are varied.
- ❖ Apprentices suggest two main areas for improvement within the scheme:
  1. College
  2. Relationship Between College And Work

## 4. Background Research

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Whatever the proportion of, or reasons for, early leavers in the Scottish electrotechnical sector, it can only be properly assessed against the experiences across the rest of the Scottish economy.

### **Findings**

It is extremely difficult to ascertain the average wastage rate of Modern Apprentices is. While many reports suggest that there are *'poor completion rates...in Modern Apprenticeship'*<sup>3</sup> courses, there are very few reports which give any precise statistics as to exactly how *'poor'* completion rates may be. As a review of Modern Apprentices by the Scottish Executive reports,

***'the population of early leavers was difficult to track down from the records made available by the Local Enterprise Companies'***<sup>4</sup>.

However, the same report did identify some reasons for apprentices leaving before their course was completed. Specifically it highlighted the necessity for careful selection of candidates and also identified the main reasons for leaving, which were:

1. Redundancy.
2. Being presented with another job opportunity.
3. Disliking the work.

However, the sample size was relatively small (there were only 23 people interviewed, who had left their Modern Apprenticeship early, from a survey of 263 people).

The problem that the Scottish Executive experienced is understandable: these findings are not ones which would do much for the promotion of Modern Apprentice courses. This point appears to be especially relevant if the Adult Learning Inspectorate's (ALI's) figures from their annual report 2001-2 concerning England's Modern Apprenticeship are considered.

The ALI found that

***'only 31% of foundation modern apprentices, 36% of advanced modern apprentices and 46% of those on NVQ-only programmes successfully completed their training in 2001-2'***.

Furthermore, although *'the best providers'* had a successful completion rate of 80%, *'the worst providers'* completion rate was only 20%.

The ALI also found that the one-year retention rates on the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (AMA) course in the engineering, technology & manufacturing areas are about 85%. This is high compared to the lowest retention rate of about 51% in the learning areas of retailing, customer service and transportation.

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<sup>3</sup> Research findings from March 2003 report by the Learning and Skills Development Agency

<sup>4</sup> Research findings from 2001 in 'Review of Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland' by SQW Limited on behalf of the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department (SEELLD)

These figures are supported by the research findings of the Learning and Skills Development Agency (March 2003) who state,

***'only 45% of Foundation Modern Apprenticeship (FMA) Leavers during 2000-2001 gained any full qualification at level 2 or above. For AMAs, 49% leavers during the same period gained any full qualification at Level 3 or above'.***

The other source of information that may provide further insight into wastage rates is a Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Survey of Members on Modern Apprenticeships (2000). In this report, employers claimed that 49% of employers had apprentices who left their programme without completing all of its required elements. Unfortunately, the sample size is, once again, relatively small; 108 employers were questioned.

So, in the words of The Guardian newspaper, in Britain as a whole

***'at the last count, barely half of youngsters embarking on [modern apprentices] were seeing them through to the end'<sup>5</sup>.***

Although the poor completion rates are grudgingly recognised, there are few attempts to pinpoint the apprentices' reasons for leaving their training courses or indeed any factors, which may encourage them to stay.

#### **Summary**

- ❖ There is little information available regarding retention rates or peoples' reasons for leaving Modern Apprenticeship courses.
- ❖ The Scottish Executive found three main reasons for apprentices leaving their course:
  1. Redundancy
  2. Being presented with another job opportunity
  3. Disliking the work

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<sup>5</sup> Extract from The Guardian; November 27, 2001. Article by Peter Kingston – "Theory makes perfect"

## 5. Conclusions

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Our conclusions can be summarised under a variety of headings:

### *Difficulties At Work*

- The results gathered in Section 2 suggest that apprentices infrequently leave their training due to a lack of support in the workplace: only 1.5% of employers offer their apprentices no support at all.
- Apprentices may respond to informal meetings better than formal meetings
- Overall, there appears to be a high level of support accessible to apprentices in the workplace and the most common remark regarding companies was that apprentices are *'enjoying'* their jobs and are being *'taught well'* – even a few who have left the course before completion agree with these sentiments

### *Difficulties At College*

- 83.6% of apprentices have no problems with any perceived differences or similarities between college and school.
- 58.6% feel college is like school to some degree
- The difficulty of the theoretical work undertaken at college is the main reason apprentices and employers give for some apprentices leaving the scheme before completion – a major contributory factor, which is also recognised in a recent report by the Scottish Executive<sup>6</sup>.
- The possible causes for apprentices finding the college work too hard are threefold:
  - Insufficient time to learn material;
  - Poor teaching and support from college
  - Apprentices' academic ability.
- Due to the mixed response regarding the amount of time spent at college, it seems unlikely that this is a major reason why some apprentices struggle with the college work.
- Some early leavers freely admitted that they simply found the course *'too hard'* and employers listed intelligence as one of the key qualities that separates apprentices who successfully complete their course and those who leave early. In fact, 42.9% of apprentices find the *'theory work harder than...expected'* – **possible relationship to selection test**

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<sup>6</sup> Research findings from 2001 in 'Review of Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland' by SQW Limited on behalf of the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department (SEELLD)

### Communication

- Personality clashes generally seem to result from a lack of understanding. For example, one early leaver said: *'I would liked to have continued but my employer lost patience because he thought I wasn't learning anything but what I was doing at college wasn't relevant to my job'*.
- Both apprentices and employers desire more communication between employers and colleges because it is felt that *'what is taught at college is not always relevant to work'*.
- One employer even feels that course content should be developed by employers and training officers.
- Furthermore, a few employers mentioned that because, after college exams, apprentices *'aren't always told what they failed on... supervisors [at work] can't help them tackle the problem'*.

### Problems With Apprentices Employability

- 26.2% of employers feel *'they are not properly prepared for work'* but 50.7% of apprentices found the work *'pretty much as expected'*.
- While 38.1% of employers feel apprentices *'do not have an accurate understanding of what they're getting into'*, over 80% of apprentices rated the information they received as *'good'*.

### General Issues

- There are no trends revealed in the data regarding pay: while half of employers feel apprentices are paid too much, half feel they are not paid enough.
- Around half of apprentices who have left the scheme are not earning more in their new employment, which may reveal that money was not a significant motivating factor for apprentices to leave.
- The fact that there are many different paths that early leavers are evidently taking perhaps reveals that these apprentices comprise the natural wastage, which any course expects.
- Also, the difficulty of travel and a desire to return to full time study are not motivating factors for apprentices to leave the scheme.

### Overall Conclusions

As is evident from the extremely positive response to the survey, the majority of employers and apprentices are very happy with the training scheme.

The fact that over 70% of employers have had *'less than 10%'* of apprentices leave before completion (and many of those actually stated *'none'*) is indicative of the high retention rate in this Modern Apprenticeship course.

This is a genuine achievement for SECTT when retention rates in other sectors are considered (see 4. Background Research).

The varied paths that early leavers take, and their mostly positive remarks about the scheme, suggests that the majority of drop outs are unavoidable and comprise, to some extent, the natural wastage, which any course can expect.

However, despite the positive opinions regarding the course, there were three main factors that appear to encourage apprentices to leave the scheme before completion:

1. Some apprentices struggle with the technical difficulty of the college work. However, this appears to mainly result from their academic ability and a possible lack of support as opposed to insufficient time to learn material.
2. Some apprentices experience workplace difficulties or '*lose heart*' due to a lack of communication between colleges and employers regarding course content.
3. A lack of interest in the industry or simply discovering the '*job is not for them*' is also frequently cited as a reason for leaving.

## 6. Recommendations

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Due to the high retention rates and the fact that many of the factors influencing apprentices to leave cannot be directly controlled, there are five recommendations, which can be made on the basis of the findings.

### **Communication**

In order to improve retention rates and improve the learning situation for current apprentices, more communication is needed between colleges and employers.

There are a number of possible ways to achieve further interaction:

#### **1. Forums**

One employer suggested that an efficacious method of ensuring that employers and colleges exchanged ideas and reports about apprentices regularly would be to introduce a *'forum system'*.

The forum could be held, for example, every two to three months and employers and colleges from the local area could all meet with the other people helping train individual apprentices.

Perhaps employers could be provided with a schedule of the apprentices' college work and vice versa to help ensure that the work undertaken at college and on-site is relevant. This could then be discussed and updated at the forum, with the help of training officers.

This would allow joint strategies for helping individual apprentices to be developed and so avoid situations such as employers feeling unable to help an apprentice pass their exam because they do not know what they failed on.

#### **2. Telephone Lists**

Many employers found it difficult to find contact numbers for college staff and the colleges had similar problems in contacting the right person at the employing firm. SECTT officers have these details but are not always an appropriate or optimum mechanism for such contacts.

If employers and colleges were provided with a contact name and telephone number for each other, then if there were any problems regarding an apprentice, it would be possible for both parties to discuss it. Also, this way employers and the college would be aware of the problem immediately.

#### **3. Training Officer**

Another way to increase communication is to for the training officer to discuss reports and issues with the college and employer separately and to develop strategies on their behalf. This would mean that employers and colleges would not have to fit meetings around their schedules, and so they may be more receptive to and have more time to help develop ideas.

### **Selection Process**

#### **4. Selection Test**

A number of findings indicate that attention to the selection test may be beneficial, not the least of which was the lack of clear correlation between standard grade results and the pre-employment assessment percentiles. It may be beneficial to review the selection test and make it slightly more rigorous.

Although some apprentices may initially be uneasy about the difficulty level, if they pass then it is likely they will be encouraged by their success. Furthermore, the current situation whereby some apprentices get so disheartened by the difficulty of the course and so leave could be avoided.

#### **5. Standard Grades as Additional Indicator**

It may also be beneficial to consider apprentices' grade in Standard Grade Mathematics if they score particularly close to the pass mark in the pre-employment assessment. Where an apprentice has achieved a grade three or above, then the findings of the present study suggest that they are more likely to successfully complete the course.

### **Academic Problems**

The difficulty that many apprentices have with the college work could possibly be somewhat alleviated through the implementation of a mechanism to support their learning.

#### **6. On-Line Learning Support Tool**

College resources are always limited but it may be worthwhile for the sector as a whole to consider ways of supporting all apprentices with a greater range of resources. The most cost effective way would be through an on-line apprentice learning centre which would allow apprentices to access a dedicated learning site covering all aspects of their course.

Over time this could be expanded to cover elements of all subsidiary specialisms – eg public lighting, panel wiring, alarms, etc. – and it might even be enhanced in order to allow direct contact between apprentices and a “panel” of college tutors.

### **Summary**

The three main recommendations of this report are:

- ❖ Increase/enhance communication between employers and colleges by the use of forums or panels and improvements to the way in which communication is supported
- ❖ Address the minor issues revealed by this study relating to the selection process. It may be worthwhile considering ways of increasing its rigour slightly and of making use of other indicators during the selection process
- ❖ Consider an on-line industry resource to support all apprentices

## 7. Appendix

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### *References*

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