



# **EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL ROLL-OUT OF THE E-SKILLS4INDUSTRY PROGRAMME**

**Final Report**

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# Contents

<b>Key findings and recommendations</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Aims and objectives	1
1.3 Methodology	2
1.4 Structure of the report	3
<b>2. Trainee demographics</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 Characteristics of trainees	4
2.2 Previous experiences	7
2.3 Key observations	8
<b>3. Views and experiences of the college course</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1 Views and experiences of trainees	9
3.2 College staff views	15
3.3 Key observations	20
<b>4. Views and experiences of the 2-week work placements</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1 Preparation for the work placement	21
4.2 Experience of the work placement	21
4.3 Relevance of the e-skills4industry course	23
4.4 Impact of the work placement	23
4.5 The views of work placement supervisors	24
4.6 Key observations	26
<b>5. Trainees' experiences of the 6-month job placement</b>	<b>27</b>
5.1 Satisfaction with the job placement	27
5.2 Most liked aspects of the job placement	27
5.3 Learning gains from the job placement	29
5.4 Least liked aspects of the job placement	31
5.5 Relevance of skills learnt in college to the job placement	32
5.6 Trainees' experience of doing the NVQ	34
5.7 Support during the job placement	36
5.8 Links with college during the job placement	36
5.9 Key observations	38
<b>6. Employers' views and experiences of the 6-month job placement</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1 Employer expectations	39
6.2 Preparation for the job placement	41
6.3 Employers' experiences of the job placement	42
6.4 Supporting the trainee during the job placement	46
6.5 Employers' views and experiences of the NVQ	47
6.6 Supervisors' views of the e-skills4industry course	48
6.7 Outcomes	49
6.8 Future involvement in the programme	53
6.9 Key observations	53

<b>7. Outcomes</b>	<b>55</b>
7.1 Trainee destinations and future aspirations	55
7.2 Trainee satisfaction with the course	56
7.3 Trainee retention	57
7.4 Trainee skills, knowledge and personal development	59
7.5 Achievement of the apprenticeship	61
7.6 Key observations	62
<b>8. Conclusions and implications</b>	<b>63</b>
8.1 Assessing the success of the e-skills4industry national roll-out	63
8.2 Developing and strengthening e-skills4industry	63
8.3 Achieving and sustaining employer involvement	65

# Key findings and recommendations

## Key Findings

- Colleges had successfully recruited the target group for the programme in terms of trainees' age and characteristics. However, ten per cent of trainees interviewed exceeded the target of having more than three GCSEs A\*-C. Several of these left the course early, moving onto other, higher level courses.
- While almost all trainees were satisfied with the programme overall, just over two-thirds said they were satisfied with the college course. They particularly liked the practical aspects of learning about computers and the employability skills element of the course.
- Trainees were least positive about the more theoretical aspects of the course such as Key Skills, having to sit external exams and lack of support and guidance for completing the NVQ.
- The 2-week work placements were seen to be particularly successful by trainees if they combined an initial period of work shadowing followed by some opportunities for hands-on work.
- Almost all trainees were satisfied with their job placement experience and felt that it had enabled them to extend the skills and knowledge developed as part of the college course. Both trainees and employers thought the college course should have put more emphasis on developing trainees' customer service and telephone skills.
- Trainees were generally positive about the experience of doing the NVQ, although almost a third had found it difficult to complete it while working at the same time.
- Most job placement supervisors saw the NVQ as a valuable part of the course and none saw the qualification as burdensome. Employers reported that they would have liked more information on the NVQ before the job placement started.
- Most trainees had workplace mentors and felt they had benefited from their support. However, contrary to the guidelines provided to employers, in many cases trainees' supervisors or team leaders acted as their mentors.
- Most supervisors were able to identify gains to their own organisation of having taken on a trainee and almost all said they would be willing to be involved in the programme in the future. All but one supervisor said they would recommend the programme to other employers.
- While almost two-thirds of supervisors interviewed had expected to offer a job at the end of the placement, only just over half had actually done so. Main reasons for not offering a job included a company freeze on recruitment and lack of satisfaction with the performance of the trainee.

- More than half of those who had completed a 6-month job placement (38 trainees) had continued working in IT after their placement and five in six trainees intended to pursue a career in IT.
- By the end of April 2005, only 12 of the trainees had attained an Apprenticeship, although many more had achieved one or two of its components. About half of the trainees valued achieving an Apprenticeship because they saw it as an additional qualification that would demonstrate their skills and knowledge.
- Around half of the trainees who were accepted onto the e-skills4industry course left early. Trainee retention was particularly poor for female trainees and those with 3 or more GCSEs A\*-C, partly due to some moving onto other, higher level, courses.
- The main reported benefits to colleges of delivering the programme included establishing links with employers and aiding the professional development of course tutors.

### **Recommendations**

- College staff involved in the programme need to be allocated sufficient time to develop and sustain links with employers. The evaluation suggests that it may be advisable to have one designated member responsible in each college for setting up placements.
- Colleges need to adopt teaching styles that are responsive to the previous experiences of trainees and their general dislike of too much writing and traditional class-room based approaches. Key Skills, in particular, need to be delivered in a more integrated way so that trainees can learn by doing and can see the relevance to the workplace.
- Colleges need to consider ways in which they can attract more female trainees onto their courses and what they can do to keep them involved.

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

e-skills4industry is a business-led initiative launched in September 2001 to increase employability levels among trainees who are from disadvantaged communities with high levels of adult unemployment. The initiative is led by Deloitte with the support of HSBC, Morgan Stanley, News International, SHL Group, Vodafone and Lewisham College together with Business in the Community and the Learning and Skills Council.

As a result of the successful pilot in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the project was rolled out on a national level across nine colleges of further education, commencing in September 2003. The course aims to provide structured IT training and work experience to 16-18 year-olds. It has been specifically designed for trainees who have decided to follow a non-academic route, and who are at risk of unemployment or under-employment. It aims to provide them with the skills, qualifications and experience that are needed to secure entry-level jobs in IT. e-skills4industry combines classroom training in a college of further education with project work, employability skills training, work experience and an extended job placement. The trainees work towards achieving a level 2 NVQ during their job placement which, together with their college work, is expected to lead to the award of an Apprenticeship in IT.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by Deloitte/Business in the Community (BITC) to carry out an evaluation of the e-skills4industry national roll out between May 2003 and April 2005.

## **1.2 Aims and objectives**

The main aims of the evaluation were to provide a detailed and comprehensive assessment of the extent to which the national roll-out was able to build on and implement successful practice established during the e-skills4industry pilot project.

More specifically, the objectives of the evaluation were as follows:

- to examine the implementation process of e-skills4industry on a national level
- to assess the effectiveness of the programme in developing participants' skills and employability, helping them to achieve relevant qualifications in IT and finding employment at the end of the programme
- to identify short- and long-term barriers to the successful implementation of the programme and make recommendations on possible strategies to address these issues
- to draw out good practice lessons at strategic and operational levels to inform the future development of the programme.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The evaluation of the e-skills4industry programme was based around a longitudinal/follow-up study of **all trainees on the course**. It was originally intended that all trainees (up to 220 trainees) across the participating colleges would initially be interviewed, and for the NFER research team to subsequently select 100 trainees for three follow-up interviews (as detailed below). However, as the numbers of trainees across colleges participating in the programme were lower than anticipated, it was decided to track all trainees involved across the nine colleges.

The longitudinal study consisted of four rounds of interviews at four distinct stages of the programme, as follows:

- at the start of the programme (September/October 2003)
- after the end of the first college term (January/February 2004)
- towards the end of the college programme (May/June 2004)
- towards the end of the job placement (January/February 2005).

As part of the first round, 106 trainees were interviewed. The NFER research team was able to re-interview 91 trainees as part of the second round of interviews and 83 at the end of the college programme. The final round of interviews involved 62 trainees. Overall, 44 trainees were interviewed on each of the four visits, while most others were spoken to on three occasions. The main reason for the declining number of interviewees across the four



rounds was trainee dropout from the course – it is worth noting though that in all four rounds a number of trainees were ‘missed’ usually due to non-attendance or illness on the day(s) of visits rather than refusal to be interviewed. Interviews with college staff (see below) were used to explore trainees’ reasons for non-attendance and leaving the course early.

Further data used to augment and contextualise trainees’ experiences and views was collected, as follows:

- telephone interviews with 11 regional partnership members, including employers and local government organisations (December 2003)
- face-to-face interviews with two or three members of staff in each college, including course tutors, college senior managers, on four occasions
- face-to-face interviews with NVQ assessors as part of the fourth round of interviews in each of the colleges
- telephone interviews with 28 placement supervisors after the 2-week work placement and 32 supervisors at the end of the 6-month job placement covering all nine colleges.

## **1.4 Structure of the report**

This report presents the findings of the whole evaluation, with a particular emphasis on the main outcomes of the 6-month job placement. Chapter 2 outlines the characteristics and previous experiences of trainees, while Chapter 3 explores their overall views and satisfaction with the college course. The following Chapter 4 explores trainees’ and placement supervisors’ views of the 2-week work placement. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the 6-month job placement, with the former providing trainees’ views and the latter exploring the views of work and job placement supervisors. The main outcomes of the e-skills4industry programme are presented in Chapter 7, while Chapter 8 outlines the main lessons learnt from the evaluation and the implications of the research for the future development of the programme.

## 2. Trainee demographics

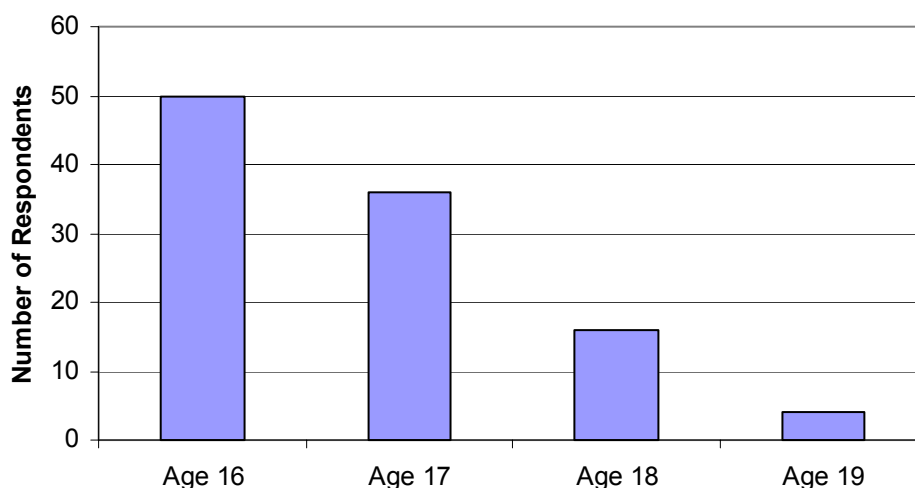
This chapter presents the main characteristics and previous experiences of those 106 trainees interviewed as part of the first round of college visits. The information presented in this chapter was derived from interviews with trainees and from data provided by each of the colleges.

### 2.1 Characteristics of trainees

#### Age

As illustrated by Figure 1 below, the largest proportion of trainees interviewed (50) were aged 16, while just over one-third was aged 17. Only a very small number were older than the intended target audience of 16–18 for the e-skills4industry course – indeed, some of these may have turned 19 after the start of the course.

**Figure 1 Age of Trainees**



#### Ethnicity

As regards the ethnicity of trainees, there were a relatively high proportion of black and ethnic minority (BME) trainees in comparison with the distribution in the overall UK population (estimated to be around eight per cent). Out of 96 trainees for whom data on trainees' ethnicity was made available by colleges, 39 were classified as BMEs. Visits to individual colleges revealed

though that this distribution was not the same across all colleges. In fact, the high proportion of BMEs was due to some colleges with almost exclusively such trainees on their courses, which in most cases reflected the local demographics. In contrast, some colleges had either no, or very few, BME trainees.

Only one of the colleges visited had implemented a strategy aiming at specifically recruiting BME trainees onto the course. This involved distributing leaflets which provided information on the course to specific locations such as youth clubs or leisure facilities known to attract high proportions of these trainees. Most of the colleges said that they did not have the time or resources to target BMEs.

## **Gender**

As regards the gender of trainees, only four of the 106 trainees interviewed were female. In one college, three girls had joined the course but had dropped out for various reasons, including personal reasons and moving onto a higher level course. In another college, two female trainees had left because they did not like the site of the college which was initially used to deliver the course, as the college tutor explained:

*Both of those girls didn't like the environment or the location of the first centre and they left within a couple of days (...). Their criticism was valid; it wasn't a particularly nice place for the trainees to be and all the trainees felt that (...) there was no library and no social centre. Students came and went almost on a part-time basis.*

The course had since then relocated to a different site within the college, which was more popular with the trainees. However, another girl had left the course after that to get a full-time job. The tutor did not think that '*she left because the group was too boy-based*'. However, interviews with the few girls involved in the e-skills4industry programme in some of the other colleges revealed that all of them identified being '*in the minority*' as an issue. Furthermore, several of them complained about having to '*put up with the boys' bad behaviour and attitude*'. This may imply, therefore, that being in the minority could be a factor which could have encouraged some of the girls to leave the course.

College staff explained that female trainees were less attracted to the course due to its emphasis on IT maintenance – however again, as in the case of BMEs, they had not made any particular efforts to attract girls onto the course. This was reflected in the very low proportions of female trainees who had applied to the course across all nine colleges. More specific details are provided below:

- in three colleges, no female trainees had applied
- in two colleges, one had applied but not passed the test
- in four colleges, between two and four girls had applied.

Staff in one college emphasised that they wanted to ‘*break the gender divide*’ for future e-skills4industry courses, by involving female staff and trainees in the recruitment process. They also intended to target girls’ schools in future.

### **Previous achievements**

Just under 90 per cent of trainees interviewed fell into the target group of having achieved three GCSEs A\*-C or less. Most of the colleges had either no or very few trainees who had achieved more than this. However, in one case, a college had not managed to attract sufficiently high numbers of applicants and had taken on a higher proportion of trainees with more than three GCSEs A\*-C.

A more specific breakdown of trainees’ previous achievements is provided below:

- ten trainees had achieved four or more GCSEs A\*-C
- ten trainees had achieved three GCSEs A\*-C
- 43 trainees had achieved one or two GCSEs A\*-C
- 31 trainees had achieved no GCSEs A\*-C, but at least one GCSE D-G
- 11 trainees had achieved no previous qualifications
- no data was available for one student.

This shows that the highest proportion of trainees on the e-skills4industry programme had achieved one or two GCSEs A\*-C. It is worth noting that more than one in ten had no previous qualifications. Further details of

interviewees' experiences of school and the reasons for such a lack of achievement are provided in the next section.

## 2.2 Previous experiences

Trainees had joined the e-skills4industry programme from a variety of other settings, including school, college, sixth-form college, work, unemployment, life skills training or alternative school provision. The highest proportion, just under half of those interviewed, had come straight from school. Around one quarter had completed or dropped out of another college course, while one in ten had come from a sixth-form college. Only six trainees had been in work, five were unemployed, two had been on a life skills training programme and one student had been engaged in alternative school provision.

Many of those interviewed had **negative experiences of school**, including being bullied, not fitting in, not getting on with the teachers or underachieving. One young man, for example, commented that:

*It was not very good - a lot of people tried to bully me but the school didn't do anything about it. I used to have to walk with crutches so I couldn't walk properly, so they used to pick on me about that. Also I didn't learn much. The teachers tried to teach me, but they didn't know how to.*

Another young man felt that he had not been given the right kind of support to help him achieve at school. As he explained:

*It was OK, but my grades were not good because I wasn't giving enough attention. Also it was not a good school – not a good environment. Also, for example, in maths we never had a proper teacher, just always supply teachers.*

The interviewees' comments suggested a strong feeling of disaffection from school but not necessarily from learning. Indeed, many felt that the e-skills4industry course offered them a second chance to achieve in an environment more suited to their needs (see Chapter 3).

Some of those **coming from another college course** had completed it but had not got onto the next level course, so they saw e-skill4industry as a good alternative. In the words of one interviewee:

*Last year I did and passed a GNVQ Foundation IT course at [another College]. I applied for Intermediate IT there and at [this college] and did not get on it, so I went for e-skills4industry, for which low school qualifications were not an issue.*

Others had dropped out of other courses, had decided to change their vocational area or saw e-skills4industry as an ideal progression opportunity. One young man had, for example, done a CLAIT qualification in college last year and saw e-skills4industry as *'the ideal next step'*.

## **2.3 Key observations**

- Colleges had successfully recruited the target group for the programme in terms of their age and characteristics. However, ten per cent of trainees interviewed exceeded the target of having more than three GCSEs A\*-C.
- Most of the trainees joining the programme were male and aged 16. Almost four in ten course participants were classified as being black or ethnic minorities.
- Just under 90 per cent of trainees had achieved three GCSEs A\*-C or less. More than one in ten had no previous qualifications.
- Many of those joining the programme had negative experiences at school, including being bullied, not fitting in, not getting on with teachers or under-performing.

### **3. Views and experiences of the college course**

This chapter is based on all four rounds of interviews with trainees and college staff, with the main emphasis on the third and fourth rounds at the end of the e-skills4industry college course in May and June 2004 and towards the end of the 6-month job placement in December 2004 and March 2005. Reference is also made, where relevant, to the NFER interim report of May 2004<sup>1</sup>, which took account of the first two rounds of interviews.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first deals with the trainees' views of the college course and the second concentrates on the views of college staff.

#### **3.1 Views and experiences of trainees**

##### **3.1.1 Most liked aspects**

Trainees stated very similar preferences across all four rounds of interviews. In particular, almost all (four out of five trainees) identified practical work as the best part of the course and they expressed satisfaction with the way in which this 'hands-on' experience of IT maintenance increased their level of knowledge about computers. Employability skills were the second most popular component, which more than three-quarters said they enjoyed. It was not just that trainees enjoyed this part of the course; they could also appreciate its relevance, as one trainee explained:

*I've liked employability skills best, because it brings out the skills that help you in life. They're also very useful skills to help you get a job, and it also opens your eyes to what the interviewer wants to hear from you.*

Even those who said they did not like employability skills (less than one in ten), were not always entirely negative about it and tended to pick out specific

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<sup>1</sup> SPIELHOFER, T and WADE, P. (2004). Evaluation of the National Roll-Out of the e-skills4industry Programme: First Interim Report. Unpublished report.

irritations, such as having to wear smart clothes, giving presentations and not getting on with the instructor, as the main reasons for their lack of enthusiasm.

The other aspects of the college course that were most appreciated were:

- the college environment, which for many contrasted favourably with school
- the way in which it had enabled them to meet new people and make new friends
- their preference for the teaching styles used by college staff.

During the first and second interviews, many of the trainees referred to the college environment as a positive factor in their attitude towards the e-skills4industry course. About a quarter of the trainees emphasised that one of the best parts of the course was the way it had enabled them to meet new people and make new friends. For some trainees this was more important than just a social benefit, as one interviewee explained:

*I came to this college to get away from the tough crowd around [my home town]. I've now got friends here and I've broken from that group and I'm better off in this crowd.*

In addition, one in ten of the trainees interviewed in the second round made a point of contrasting their new environment with their negative experiences of school. In particular, they highlighted being treated as adults and being given more freedom than at school. In the words of one trainee:

*In college they treat you like adults. It's a mature environment. College tutors and trainees treat each other with respect. In college, teachers are more up-front; they let you know what is going on, which is better.*

The qualities of college staff and their teaching styles were also contrasted favourably with previous experiences. The following comments were all made by trainees during the second round of interviews:

*It feels like a family environment. You can tell them if you've got a problem and they'll do their best to make you understand.*

*[Our tutor] really gives us a choice of how we want to learn. She'll ask us whether we want to do individual revision or group work – having*



*that flexibility is great. It is not like school where you get told what to do and how to do it.*

*They're friendly, it's a relaxed atmosphere. They're strict about work, but if you do the work everything's OK.*

During the second round of interviews, trainees were asked to identify the styles of learning that they liked best. Overall, the clear preference was for what could be termed as 'directed self-study'. This involved being given information at the beginning of a lesson, then working in small groups, or individually, on aspects related to the topic, receiving one-to-one support from the tutor if necessary and finishing with a summing-up session.

The other teaching and learning styles which were particularly valued were learning by doing, breaking down topics into manageable chunks and combining a variety of teaching approaches. Group work was also generally popular. Four in five interviewees in the second round said that they liked working with others, especially if they were able to choose their own groups. The response of one trainee: '*I like group work and being part of a team, so we all put ideas in and share knowledge*', reflected the view that it was a good method of encouraging team work and collaborative learning. However, not all trainees were so keen on group work; some because they were '*too shy*' and others because they felt it encouraged bad habits, as described in this remark:

*Group work is more fun, but I think often the best person in the group does all the real work and every-one else just copies.*

The high level of appreciation of the college environment probably came through from the trainees particularly strongly in the first two rounds of interviews, because of the contrast it provided with school. As Chapter 2 has shown, many of those joining the e-skills4industry course had negative experiences at school and low confidence in their own abilities to achieve qualifications. The opportunity to start again in different circumstances and with a more practically-based course was welcomed and most responded well to the more informal atmosphere the college provided.

### 3.1.2 Satisfaction with the college course

During the second, third and fourth rounds of interviews, the trainees were asked to comment on their level of satisfaction with the year they spent in college. Their responses are set out in Table 1 below:

**Table 1** Satisfaction with college course across last three rounds of interviews

	<b>Very satisfied</b>	<b>Quite satisfied</b>	<b>A bit disappointed</b>	<b>Not at all satisfied</b>	<b>N</b>
Round 2	46%	50%	3%	1%	91
Round 3	34%	49%	17%	0%	83
Round 4	19%	48%	31%	2%	62

*Data source: NFER evaluation of e-skills4industry course, 2004-2005*

As can be seen from Table 1, 96 per cent of trainees were satisfied with the course at the time of the second round of interviews, which took place in January and February 2004. However, in rounds three and four there was a steady decline in the proportion of respondents who were ‘very satisfied’ and a rise in interviewees stating that they were ‘a bit disappointed’. Still it is worth noting that even by the fourth round of interviews more than two-thirds (67 per cent) of trainees remained satisfied with the college course.

### 3.1.3 Possible reasons for decline in satisfaction with the college course

Analysis of interview responses suggests the following possible reasons for this decline:

- too much emphasis on reading and writing
- increased resistance to Key Skills, in particular Application of Number
- trainees’ resistance to external testing (Key Skills, A+, IT Essentials)
- a perceived lack of practical work
- a greater attraction to doing ‘real work’ rather than ‘college work’
- poor college organisation, including lack of clear guidance and support for completing the NVQ.

The resistance to the learning of ‘theory’ and note-taking as well as the reading of large chunks of text were aspects of the college course which many trainees described as boring and difficult to manage. There were some who

accepted the theoretical element of the course as tedious but necessary, as this trainee from the second round of interviews explained:

*The least favourite part is doing all the theory. There is a lot of it and a lot of safety issues that we have to cover. But even that, I know, is useful and you just have to get through it.*

However, there were others who found it more difficult to accept the need for a theoretical base for their practical skills and for whom the note-taking and reading, whether on screen or from a book, became increasingly burdensome. The approaching tests and examinations for Key Skills, A+ and IT essentials added to this pressure and may help to explain why, by the time of the third round of interviews in the summer term of 2004, there was a reduced sense of satisfaction with the college course when compared to the working environment.

The Key Skills element of the course was another area that came to dominate the views of some trainees as the deadlines approached for completing their portfolios and examinations. Several interviewees saw this aspect of the course as too closely resembling their experiences of schools, while others complained about what they saw as their lack of relevance to working in IT. Not all Key Skills were equally disliked. Trainees were generally most negative about Application of Number, which some respondents referred to as 'Maths'. Attitudes also depended, to some extent, on how Key Skills were taught in the nine colleges and the perceived qualities of the staff who were teaching them. The NFER interim report drew attention to the popularity among many trainees of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) as a method of delivering IT Key Skills and the way in which colleges using on-line learning and project-based approaches tended to encourage a more positive response to Key Skills.

Even more significant may be the fact that by the time of the third round of interviews, trainees had completed their 2-week work placement. For some trainees, this experience had shown up some gaps in their practical abilities, and some of these were more likely to complain about not having been given enough opportunities to develop such skills. One respondent complained, for example, that the course '*only touched on stripping down and rebuilding computers*'. Several respondents stated that more time should have been spent learning about IT maintenance and fault-finding. This view was shared by

others at the end of the job placement, as one trainee stated: *'There was not enough practical work, not much chance to play around with the machines'*.

It is also worth noting that trainees' generally positive experience of both their 2-week and 6-month job placements and their enjoyment of the practical nature of the work (see Chapters 4 and 5) may have also negatively influenced their perceptions of the college course. The general impression gained from interviewing the trainees at the end of the course was that their placements really mattered most to them and that they now considered themselves as employees rather than college trainees. College still provided them with support and sometimes with a social network, but for many, there was a perception that they had now 'outgrown' college. In addition, when they reflected on the college course, there were specific shortcomings which some now felt they could see more clearly.

At the time of the fourth round of interviews, there were 16 trainees across eight of the nine colleges who explained that they were dissatisfied with the college course because of what they perceived as *'poor college organisation'*. In some cases, this related to uncertainty about whether they would ever gain, for example, the A+ qualification, or that there were too many staff changes. One trainee complained that: *'There were too many different tutors for A+, so it was bitty and confusing and we should have spent more time on it'*. Even at the time of the third round of interviews there were 16 trainees who gave poor organisation and lack of planning as a reason for dissatisfaction with the college course. Their comments ranged from the fairly moderate criticism that: *'there was far too much work towards the end of the course'*, to the more disillusioned: *'the course felt as if it had been made up as we went along'*. As noted in Chapter 5, several trainees also complained about a lack of support and guidance for completing the NVQ. One trainee argued that, *'the teachers need to spend more time with us working on the NVQ. They also could have better explained what to expect before we started the NVQ'*.

Despite these critical views of the college course, it is worth noting that over two-thirds of participants remained satisfied with it. The college course may never have been able to compete in popularity with the job placement, but as most trainees realised, without the college course, they would never have been able to do the job placement and they saw both together as valuable elements of the e-skills4industry course.

## 3.2 College staff views

### 3.2.1 Adapting the course

College tutors and coordinators were generally aware of the preferences and dislikes of trainees on the course and had in response tried to adapt their approaches and teaching styles. As a result, colleges had adapted the programme in response to differences in experiences and expertise of staff and also to differences in student needs and group sizes. This meant that there were noticeable differences across the nine colleges, including:

- colleges varied in the technical qualification they offered to trainees, ranging from A+, IT Essentials and City and Guilds 7262; college staff explained that their choice depended on various factors, including staff expertise, trainees' needs, and accreditation of colleges as testing centres; several respondents noted that the A+ qualification in particular was too challenging for most of their trainees.
- some colleges had adapted the materials provided by Lewisham College to deliver parts of the course, including the employability skills element; several respondents complained that the materials provided were not good enough and, in the case of employability skills, were not designed to prepare trainees for the relevant NCFE qualification.
- several colleges had decided to offer the ECDL instead of delivering IT Key Skills, in response to feedback from employers and/or because it was seen as more accessible to trainees.
- other colleges had used an integrated approach to the teaching of Key Skills, whereby trainees were required to complete projects that covered all three Key Skills areas (Communication, IT, and Application of Number).

### 3.2.2 Lessons learnt

As part of the fourth round of interviews, respondents were asked to outline what issues they had encountered and the main lessons they had learnt from delivering the course.

College staff were particularly positive about the **employability skills** element of the course, which was generally regarded as popular with the trainees and of particular benefit to them. By the time of the fourth round of interviews, at least four colleges had already or were about to extend such teaching to other courses. As one course coordinator pointed out:

*One big gain for the college is the employability skills unit. The college is looking at all of our full-time courses doing it in the future.*

*It gives trainees very good skills early on and improves their chances [of finding work].*

One college said that if they were to run the course again they would dedicate even more time to this element, as they saw it as ‘*vital to their transition into work and beyond for their life in general*’. Another respondent thought that in future they would use this unit to prepare trainees to work more autonomously before starting their 6-month job placement.

Interviewees in several colleges reported that the **challenging background characteristics** of many of those joining the programme had led to more problems than expected. There were four colleges where there was a staff perception that they had not been backed sufficiently by senior management on disciplinary matters and that allowing some trainees to get away with a poor attitude and failing to meet deadlines set a dangerous precedent. As one interviewee put it:

*It would have helped if the college had sorted out the few who had poor behaviour and attitudes at the beginning, then the others would have taken it seriously and, instead of ending up with moderate achievers, we could have ended up with high achievers.*

In one college, there was a perception that all the trainees would have benefited if the college management had ‘*got rid of those who were pushing the line*’. The perception that problems like poor attendance needed to be dealt with swiftly was reinforced by another coordinator who explained that in her college any poor attendees were ‘*put on a contract and this brought them up to scratch*’. She added that with a course like e-skills4industry, ‘*you need to win their trust, but at the same time you need to maintain discipline*’, and that it was important to set limits at the beginning.

Interviewees in all but one of the colleges identified various issues in relation to delivering the NVQ during the 6-month job placement. For some these difficulties related to the language of the NVQ. As one course tutor explained:

*The language of the NVQ is so complicated that although [the trainees] are technically bright, they find it a strange concept. It's very hard for them to get to grips with it.*

Respondents also complained about finding it difficult to motivate trainees to complete the NVQ given the low value attached to it by employers and because of time constraints. The NVQ assessor in one of the colleges said that next time he would:

- have a sense of urgency from the outset
- maintain the momentum through the placement
- give a clear idea of purpose by making the trainees aware of its relevance
- make them independent of the employer in their responsibility to complete it.

Others commented on the way the compilation of the portfolios was too much of a '*paper-chase*'. For trainees who disliked this method of working, it was an off-putting factor. It has to be noted that this was only an issue in those colleges which had not used the on-line system. However, only three colleges had used this system. Of these, two were very positive of the way in which it enabled trainees to complete their portfolios electronically and monitor their progress on-line. As one course tutor explained:

*It's paperless and instant, ongoing work is assessed and there's no need to sign bits of paper. Also we don't need to wait for the portfolio to come in before we can mark it. Assessment can take place on an ongoing basis and we can give immediate feedback to the trainees*

One college had trialled this method but had gone back to the paper-based approach, because '*the trainees did not use it because they were quite busy at work and some of them did not have access to a computer at home*'. A respondent in one of the colleges that had continued using it also encountered a similar problem with some trainees preferring to use the paper-based method.

Interviewees in six of the colleges were particularly positive about the way in which the e-skills4industry programme had enabled the college to develop **new links with employers**. One course coordinator, for example, said that these links could attract trainees to join their courses:

*Because we have run it we now have a pool of companies for the future. We can now attract trainees based on the fact that we are able to place trainees. Companies get someone into work for six months, so both the college and the company gain.*

It is worth noting that very few placements had been arranged by colleges on their own. Instead, in most cases, they had relied heavily on the Deloitte project team to establish links and secure employer commitment to the programme.

Respondents emphasised how they had learnt various lessons about **working with employers** as a result of the course. These included:

- maintaining regular contact with employers
- adapting working styles in line with business
- designating one link person to contact employers.

Three interviewees, for example, said that they had learnt that there was a need to maintain regular contact with employers throughout the placement. As one coordinator explained:

*Keep them informed and keep in contact regularly. It would be good to send an email probably once every two weeks, even if it is just asking if there are any issues or concerns arising. Employers also need to know everything they are being asked to do, so they need to see all the documents.*

Respondents in two colleges emphasised how the course had taught them the need to project a professional image to employers, including dressing smartly ‘in shirt and tie’, and to behave in a manner more suited to a business environment. One course coordinator made the following recommendations based on his experiences:

- Make visits or phone calls during their working day. Avoid the end of the day.
- Make the meetings with employers ‘pacey’. College time is slower and sedate. Move up a gear for businesses.
- Be concise, brief and to the point – they hate imprecise ‘waffle’.
- Keep their involvement and support of the NVQ to a minimum and based on student need.



Interviewees in two colleges also emphasised the need to have just one person as a link for employers, *‘so that they are not contacted or asked for paperwork by lots of different people – it leads to duplication and raises the admin requirement’*.

As regards **supporting trainees during their work placements**, interviewees in six colleges found that the programme had made them recognise the need to maintain continual contact with the trainees while they were away from college. College staff, for example, said it was important to *‘let trainees contact you at any time. They need information and advice regularly and they need to know that they can ask anything at any time’*. Suggested approaches included using e-mail or *‘making your mobile phone number available to them’*. Several of those interviewed emphasised that such immediate contact was important to resolve any problems *‘as soon as they arise. If you wait till your next visit, the problem may have become too big and it may be too late already’*.

Finally, staff in several colleges emphasised that the course had been more hard work than they had anticipated and that they had often not got credit for all the work they had done. As one interviewee put it:

*I have prioritised getting this course right and that hasn’t been good for the other projects I manage. The college doesn’t say ‘well done for getting that right’, they tend to pick up on the things that I haven’t had time to do on other projects and ask ‘how could you let that happen?’*

However, many of these respondents were able to identify ways in which delivering the programme had either aided their **own professional development** or given them personal satisfaction in seeing trainees succeed. One college tutor explained that:

*On a personal level, as coordinator and course tutor, I’ve learnt a great deal about insurance, indemnity, risk analysis, personal organisation, meeting senior executives, different teaching methods and difficulties in communication within the college.*

Another interviewee who felt that he had not been given credit for all the time he had put into making the course a success said that it had still been worthwhile *‘just to get someone like S to turn himself around – if it wasn’t for this course, he’d be in prison’*.

### **3.3 Key observations**

- Just over two-thirds of trainees said they were satisfied with the college course. They particularly liked the practical aspects of learning about computers and the employability skills element of the course.
- Trainees were least positive about the more theoretical aspects of the course, such as, Key Skills, having to sit external exams and lack of support and guidance for completing the NVQ.
- College staff were aware of trainees' preferences and dislikes and had tried to adapt their approaches to suit their needs. In particular, some colleges had adopted an integrated approach to teaching Key Skills, while others had offered more accessible technical qualifications instead of the A+.
- The main benefits to the colleges of delivering the programme included establishing links with employers and aiding the professional development of course tutors.

## 4. Views and experiences of the 2-week work placements

This chapter explores trainees' and placement supervisors' views of the 2-week work placement, which took place in spring 2004. It is based on interviews with 76 of the 83 trainees interviewed as part of the third round (seven trainees who were interviewed had not managed to secure a work placement)<sup>2</sup>. This chapter also draws on interviews with 28 company staff who had direct contact with trainees (and in whose companies a total of 49 trainees had completed a placement).

### 4.1 Preparation for the work placement

The majority of trainees felt they had been adequately prepared for their work placements. As one trainee explained, this was *'because we'd done all the work at college; we'd covered the practical side. I knew about hardware and software; I'd done the employability skills'*.

However, across seven colleges, 14 trainees reported not feeling fully prepared for the placement. The main reason for this was lack of information on the employer or what their role would be during the placement (nine trainees). As one trainee pointed out, *'I didn't know what I'd be doing. I didn't know where they were going to place me'*. Only a few trainees mentioned that they felt they lacked technical skills, such as one respondent who said that *'I didn't feel I could build computers from scratch'*.

### 4.2 Experience of the work placement

Most trainees said they felt that their work placements had been, on the whole, a positive experience. One trainee said: *'It was a brilliant experience. I learned a lot. I was given a lot of responsibility'*.

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<sup>2</sup> In two colleges, trainees had been required to pass a selection interview with an employer in order to secure a placement and six of the seven trainees had failed to do so. One other trainee had refused to attend despite being offered a placement because he did not feel confident enough.

The majority of trainees were given some opportunities to do hands-on tasks (58 trainees), including taking calls on the helpdesk, taking part in programme testing and installing software after an initial period of familiarisation. As described by one trainee: *'I shadowed someone for a couple of days, then I started taking calls myself. Some were quite complicated, but I did quite a lot on my own'*. Supervisors' accounts of the placements also indicated that about half of the trainees were given increased responsibility as the placement progressed.

Many trainees (23 trainees) mentioned the people they had met at the companies as being one of the best things about their 2-week work placement because they were helpful, welcoming or friendly. One trainee said: *'the people I met were so welcoming and friendly. They made sure I was OK with what I was doing'*. Other positive aspects identified included being in the workplace (21 trainees) and learning about IT or gaining experience of working in IT (19 trainees). One trainee explained that *'because you're doing the actual work, it's more fun'* and another said *'being in a working environment for the first time for me. I felt like someone important'*. Another trainee, who was pleased about having gained experience of IT, highlighted that he had gained *'experience with the hands-on practical work, opening up computers and troubleshooting'*.

Only a minority of trainees (eight) reported less positive overall experiences of the placement. The main reason for dissatisfaction was feeling bored, frustrated or disappointed with the placement because of having little to do or being confined to doing shadowing for the entire period (five trainees). For instance, one trainee said that, each day, there was *'only about one hour's worth of work. The rest of the time, I sat down, got bored and chatted'*. Such issues may, in some cases, have been related to the absence of a structure for the placement, since supervisor interviews indicated that, for about a third of trainees, the placement activities had been *ad hoc*. Other reasons why some trainees reported less positive experiences related to lack of support or understanding of their circumstances or particular needs or interests. One trainee had a particularly bad experience in this respect, as he reported:

*The overall thing was that the company didn't understand the agreement with the college that I was there to learn, not to do a job. I also felt that they were there to support me [instead of] standing back and laughing at things I could not do.*

Finally, it may be worth noting that ten trainees felt that they had to travel too far to get to their work placements, for instance one ruminated that *'I didn't like the travel. It was one hour there, one hour back, two buses'*.

### **4.3 Relevance of the e-skills4industry course**

Most trainees felt that, during their work placement, they had been able to apply something that they had learned on the college course. Around two-thirds of trainees reported that they had applied IT skills, such as those gained as part of the networking, ECDL and the A+ units. One trainee mentioned *'I wouldn't have been able to do networking and setting computers up without the course'*. In addition, about one-third of trainees reported that what they had learned as part of employability skills had helped them to know *'how to act in the workplace because I've never had a proper job before'*. Some trainees thought that customer service (14 trainees) and communications (five trainees) had been useful.

There were only ten of the 76 trainees interviewed who felt they had not really been able to apply what they had learned from the course whilst on the placement. The reasons for this were related to the company having its own specialised software or systems, or due to trainees mainly shadowing or being given tasks of little relevance (such as data entry and working in a non-IT department). One trainee reported that he had not really applied anything he had learned in college:

*because I didn't really get to do anything, just watching. There wasn't much I could do because the software they were using was completely different from anything I knew - it was just for their company.*

### **4.4 Impact of the work placement**

Trainees generally thought that the 2-week work placement had been a good preparation for the 6-month job placement. Interviewees indicated that the work placement had, for example, enabled them to get *'to know a lot of people in the office... what they're like and how to work with them'*, and to find out *'about their set up and the programmes they use [so] I'll be able to jump straight in'*. This was confirmed when trainees were interviewed at the end of

the 6-month job placement when, looking back, some commented on how the 2-week work placement had given them the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the corporate environment they later encountered during the job placement.

Most trainees indicated that they had gained more technical knowledge and skills as a result of their work placement (54 trainees). One trainee said: *'I've learned about the inside of a computer, replacing and fixing things, because I've seen it done plenty of times'*. Others mentioned they had:

- become more confident (27 trainees)
- improved their interpersonal skills (13 trainees)
- acquired experience of the workplace (13 trainees)
- gained information of use for career planning (eight trainees).

Trainees reported that the work placements had made them more aware of the reality of working in IT. Many (32 trainees) said that they had learned about the nature of the work and its demands, such as the fact *'that it's unpredictable. One minute you're really busy and the next minute you're sitting around'*. Some found out about what is required of those who work in IT (18 trainees). One trainee commented that *'IT technology is always moving up. You need to keep up with it and what can help the company in the future'*. Other gains included realising how much working in IT is enjoyable or suitable for them (ten trainees) and learning about how organisations work (ten trainees).

College staff also perceived the 2-week work placements to have had, on the whole, a positive impact on trainees. However, interviews with college staff in two colleges indicated that, trainees had returned to college *'feeling somewhat over-confident'* and that they, subsequently, had to put a lot of effort into motivating them to complete their course work.

#### **4.5 The views of work placement supervisors**

According to the 28 supervisors interviewed, their companies had become involved in e-skills4industry for various reasons, such as:

- corporate responsibility (nine supervisors). *‘The firm is interested in giving back to the community’*
- e-skills4industry opening a new line of recruitment (eight supervisors). *‘Most recruitment in IT is graduate entry level and, if this works, it will be a totally new line of recruitment’*
- believing the course was a good way of giving young people experience of working in IT (eight supervisors)
- having extra help with work (six supervisors). *‘We need someone in a junior role but not full-time, so it will fill a bit of a gap’.*

Most of the supervisors had received the **employer’s guide** regarding the placements (24 supervisors). Where this was not the case, it is possible that the guides were received by the companies but had not been passed on internally to the supervisors. Three supervisors said they had received the guide too late (either during the placement or less than one week in advance). Those that had received the guide found it to be useful and some aspects were highlighted as being of particular interest. These included the suggestions of activities, the mentoring guidelines and the guidance on religious groups.

Many companies organised recruitment-related events prior to the 2-week work placement. Eighteen supervisors reported that their company had interviewed or had informal ‘chats’ with trainees prior to the placements, and some reported that pre-visits (eight employers) and presentations on their company (seven employers) had been organised prior to the work placements.

In contrast, eleven supervisors said the trainees placed with their company had been selected for the placement by the colleges and, in most cases, they were happy with this method. One commented *‘I’m happy that the college make the selection based on the information we provide. I don’t feel I’ve got the time to devote to taking part in the selection process’*. However, a few supervisors said they would consider organising the selection of trainees for the work placements differently in the future, including carrying out selection interviews (four supervisors) and organising pre-placement visits to the company (two supervisors).

Most supervisors (22) felt that the course was useful for the work done by their organisation. As one interviewee explained:

*I think it's very useful. The skills these two trainees have got matched our requirements very well. I knew it was the A+ course and these two trainees have been very competent at what we've asked them to do. In terms of the soft skills, I think it's better than I expected. These two trainees worked very well with the teams they were in.*

Finally, most supervisors indicated that taking part in e-skills4industry had resulted in benefits for their company or their company's staff, although four interviewees said it was still too early to identify benefits. Many supervisors thought that the 2-week work placement had benefits for staff development (12 supervisors). One supervisor said '*we are a small company, so there is no one under me. So the experience of managing someone has given me a new learning experience*'. Having extra help and deriving satisfaction from helping or seeing a trainee develop were also identified as benefits (each mentioned by six supervisors).

#### **4.6 Key observations**

- Most trainees felt well prepared for the 2-week work placement. Areas of potential improvement included the need to provide trainees with more information on the placement employers.
- Placements were seen to be particularly successful by trainees if they combined an initial period of work shadowing followed by some opportunities for hands-on work. Trainees who only did work shadowing for the whole 2-week period were more likely to get bored.
- Trainees and placement supervisors regarded the two weeks as good preparation for the 6-month job placement as it enabled them to meet the people they would work with and find out about the workplace structures and procedures.



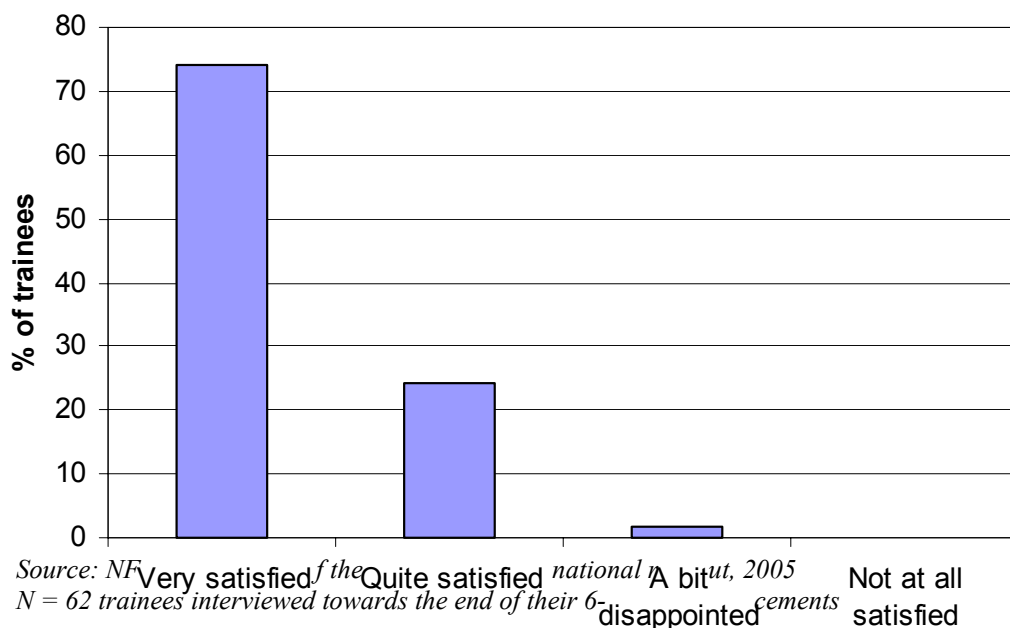
## 5. Trainees' experiences of the 6-month job placement

The data for this chapter is taken from interviews with 62 trainees, which were conducted towards the end of their 6-month job placement. The placements took place between the autumn 2004 and lasted till February or March 2005.

### 5.1 Satisfaction with the job placement

As can be seen from Figure 2 below, almost all the trainees (98 per cent) were at least quite satisfied with their 6-month job placement. While 46 trainees (74 per cent) said they were very satisfied with the placement, only one stated that he was 'a bit disappointed'.

**Figure 2** Satisfaction with the 6-month job placement



### 5.2 Most liked aspects of the job placement

The majority of trainees said that one of the aspects they had enjoyed most about the placement had been **the people** they had worked with. One young

man said: *'the best bit is the people - they're all good people to work with'*. Several commented on how they had been surprised at the way they had been accepted by other employees and by the relaxed working environment. One trainee, for example, said that:

*When I started here, I didn't know what to expect – the people have turned out to be far more laid back than I had expected. It's not as uniform as it seems; so the next place I go to I will have more confidence.*

Respondents were also very positive about the support they had received from their work colleagues and supervisors. In the words of one trainee:

*The people are great - they support me and give me help and it's interesting because you never know what to expect.*

Over two-thirds of trainees said that the best aspects for them were **learning a lot about IT** or about working in IT. Respondents commented on the way the placement had extended their knowledge of IT and given them experience of *'real work and having an opportunity to see an IT office in action'*. Another trainee, who was placed in a multinational organisation, highlighted the positive aspects of working with such a global company and the opportunities it had given him:

*The thing I enjoy about it is I'm part of a very large organisation, working internationally and dealing with customers in The Netherlands, Romania, Morocco – all over the world.*

As discussed in Chapter 3, most of the trainees on the e-skills4industry course preferred practical work to reading and writing. Thus, it was not surprising that many of them were particularly positive about the practical nature of their work during their placements. This is illustrated by one trainee's response to the question of what he had liked best about the placement:

*The practicality, because I'm not really a reading and writing person. I'd rather do hands-on. I find it a lot easier to get the knowledge out of things if I'm doing a practical activity, so I'm enjoying it.*

Similarly, another trainee commented on the way he *'liked doing real work. College was good preparation but it was pretend work. This is the real thing; it's been great'*.

At the time of the interview, only eight trainees had been offered a job with their work placement employers (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of the outcomes of the placement for all participants). Most of those who had been offered a job highlighted this as one of the best aspects or outcomes of their placements.

Almost all of the 62 interviewees thought that the 6-month job placement was a lot better than the work placement because they:

- were given more responsibility
- got a chance to really get to know the people
- were able to gain in-depth experience of what the job involves.

In the words of one respondent:

*The two weeks was just watching people do a job. As soon as the six months started I was asked to do my own jobs; there was no need to check with someone – I made my own decisions.*

However, the trainees thought that the 2-week work placement had acted as a good preparation for the 6-month job placement.

### **5.3 Learning gains from the job placement**

Asked what specifically they had learned as a result of the placement or how they had changed as a result of it, interviewees most frequently commented on:

- developing IT/technical skills (60 trainees)
- improving social/communication skills (two in three)
- becoming more confident/mature (12 trainees)
- becoming more motivated/determined to achieve (11 trainees)
- developing customer service skills (eight trainees)
- becoming more work-ready/developing work skills, such as time management; prioritising, etc. (seven trainees).

Almost all trainees were able to identify ways in which the placement had helped them develop their IT skills and knowledge. Several interviewees commented on the fact that they felt they had learnt more during their six months in the workplace than during the previous year in the college, as one trainee said:

*I think I've learnt more on the placement than I did during the time I spent at college. My IT knowledge has gone up by watching my mentor working, seeing what they're doing. And I've learnt how to use new software that I haven't used before.*

The majority of interviewees also reported on the way the placement had helped them develop their social and communication skills, including how 'to communicate with older adults in an appropriate way' and 'how to talk to people, especially over the phone'. Another trainee commented on the way it had made him 'more confident with people, more pro-active. When I first started I was a bit too quiet, a bit shy'.

More isolated comments made only by individual respondents related to the way the placement had clarified their career choice and taught them how to adapt to different environments. As regards the former, some trainees said that the placement had confirmed their interest in working in IT. One interviewee, for example, explained that:

*It's been quite an eye-opener, because I've always wanted to work with computers and now I know that I do like helpdesk and that I can do that for a company. I'd like to start as a help desk worker and work up to other roles.*

However, for another respondent it had had the opposite effect:

*Although I have enjoyed it, I know now that I shan't be going into IT, I'm going to do banking instead. I'm definitely prepared for work and I'm glad I did IT because when I get any problems with a computer in any other job I'm able to fix it, rather than panicking and having to ring people up.*

Three other trainees commented on the way the course and placement had combined to teach them how to adapt to different environments, as one of them said:

*I've learnt how to be more confident in myself and how to be in a different environment and reacting in different ways. Here in college it is middle/lower class and there it is upper class and you get to use different words like 'extraordinary'. At first I found it a bit funny, it's like when I'm talking to one of the Directors I'm talking to the Queen, like proper posh!*

#### **5.4 Least liked aspects of the job placement**

Almost half (27) of the trainees interviewed said that there was nothing they had not enjoyed about the placement. The most common issues identified among the other 35 interviewees related to:

- lack of work/being bored (eight trainees)
- having to travel a long way to their placement (eight trainees)
- balancing a heavy workload with doing the NVQ (five trainees)
- tedious/uninteresting/repetitive work tasks (four trainees)
- not getting a job (three trainees).

Several interviewees complained about being bored at times or having to do tedious or repetitive tasks. As one trainee reported:

*I didn't enjoy moving boxes, unpacking computers, and dealing with deliveries. I see other technicians doing stuff I want to do like going off-site and checking problems, but I don't do that.*

Consequently the main suggested improvements to their placements included being given more work or more of a variety of work:

*Perhaps I could have been given a bigger variety of jobs to do. Some of the other trainees here from the college have been moved around from role to role, but I've been doing the same role throughout.*

In contrast, there were other trainees who complained about having too much work or struggling to find time to complete their NVQ because of their heavy workload. As one interviewee explained:

*Yes, I've been put under too much pressure. I've got all my work to do and my line manager keeps giving me extra projects to do and I've also got my NVQ to do, so I've found it really stressful and it means I just can't find the time to do the NVQ.*

Only three respondents said that one of the worst aspects of their placement was not being offered a job by their placement company. One of these thought that the course had built his *'hopes up too much. I am really enjoying it but they have told me there is not a job available'*. It is worth noting that when they were interviewed only 24 of the trainees had been told whether they would be offered a job or not (see Chapter 7).

## 5.5 Relevance of skills learnt in college to the job placement

Over three-quarters of trainees (48 out of 62) were able to identify ways in which they had used the **IT skills** learnt on the course in the work place. Several recognised that it had given them a considerable advantage for their placement and that they could not have done so well without it, while others said that the course had taught them the basics and that they had built on this basic knowledge through their experiences in the placement. One trainee described this learning process in the following way:

*So you take what you've learnt and you've got to adapt it to the new environment, so it's kind of using what you've learnt but also learning new things at the same time.*

Some trainees were also able to provide concrete examples of using particular IT skills they had learnt on the course during their placement. As one trainee reported:

*Yes, one of them came in pretty useful the other day. I had a call that a network cable had unplugged and it was because the clip had gone. So I was able to fix that because I'd learnt that here at college.*

A slightly lower proportion of trainees (37 out of 62) were able to give examples of ways in which the **employability skills** component of the course had benefited them in the workplace. As one trainee pointed out, he saw this as the most important way in which he had been prepared for the placements:

*I think employability skills is brilliant for doing my job. Last year when we were doing all the theory side, we'd learn about it and you'd know exactly what the course is actually telling you. It also makes you realise things you don't know that you already know. It definitely set*

*me up for doing this job. If anything, that's what's helped me all the way through.*

Specific examples of the way in which the course had helped them included, making them more aware of:

- how to behave in the workplace
- what clothes to wear
- how to work in a team
- how to deal with different types of people
- health and safety requirements.

Four trainees also commented on the use they had made of customer service training. In particular, respondents highlighted learning '*about the manner you have on phone and how to speak to customers*' as beneficial.

Asked what other skills they think the course should have developed, trainees commented on wanting more:

- hands-on/practical work (12 trainees)
- networking skills training (12 trainees)
- customer service/telephone skills training (11 trainees)
- experience of software applications used in the workplace (nine trainees).

Even though most trainees said that they had been able to use the IT skills learnt on the course during their placement, there were perceived gaps. In particular, just under one-fifth of interviewees thought that they would have benefited from '*more hardware things than we did. We did enough on motherboards but we could have done more on cables, installing floppy drives and things like that*'. The same proportion of trainees said that they would have preferred '*more networking experience, especially regarding terminology and user management set-up, and learning about proxy servers. Also learning about remote networking*'. As regards the need for more experience of software applications, it is doubtful whether the college would be able to give trainees experience of the great variety used in different workplaces.

While most interviewees were very positive about the relevance of the employability skills component of the course, a sizeable proportion thought

that more should have been done to prepare their customer service skills, especially for those working on help desks. As one trainee said:

*Yes, looking back now we needed more work on phone skills and a telephone manner. Speaking to customers in the right way is important and they didn't do enough at college.*

Finally, one perceived gap in the college course identified only by one individual related to the need for training in money management skills, as he explained:

*When you start working on this job placement you come into a bit of money, more money than you had previously. There should be something on the course on how to handle the money when we suddenly get it. I think, for the first few months when I was getting money, I went a bit mad with it. It was suddenly there and I just used it all. So the course could have had some money management in it.*

## **5.6 Trainees' experience of doing the NVQ**

At the time of the interview, only two trainees had already completed all the work needed for the NVQ. However, the large majority (46 out of 62) felt confident that they would probably finish it either by the end or shortly after the end of the placement. Of the remaining 14 trainees, four felt certain they would not complete it, while ten said they were not sure whether they would do so.

Trainees were generally positive about the experience of doing the NVQ. Thus, over a third said it was 'OK', 'interesting' or even 'enjoyable' and the majority thought it was useful (45 trainees), but for different reasons, including:

- because it had taught them useful information (15 trainees)
- simply because it gave them a chance to get a qualification (13 trainees)
- because it gave them evidence of what they had learnt (nine trainees)
- because it had made them aware of what they needed to learn/improve on (five trainees)
- because it had taught them how to do an NVQ (five trainees).



One trainee, for example, when asked whether the NVQ had been useful, replied:

*Yes, it has. It's kept me on track, it's kept me thinking about the work I do. And now I look back on the folder, I can see what I've learned and the progress I've made. I look at my work logs and my personal development plan and it does show me how far I've come.*

Thirteen trainees thought that doing the NVQ was not useful – while five were not sure, saying that it depended on how employers valued the qualification in the future.

Even those who, overall, thought it was useful had still encountered difficulties, including:

- 20 trainees said that they had found it difficult to do the NVQ and working at the same time
- 12 trainees found the NVQ jargon a major barrier or turn-off
- four trainees were put off by the amount of paperwork it involved
- four trainees said they had struggled to find evidence because of their job role.

Asked what could have been done to help them finish it or complete it sooner, the most common response (apart from nothing) was that they would have liked more support and guidance from college staff (ten trainees) including one-to-one meetings. Seven trainees wanted more time in college – of these some had only started coming into college once a week towards the end of the placement, while others only came in for an afternoon each week. One trainee said that it would have helped if they had been able to do it on-line, so it would have involved less paperwork.

Finally, it is worth noting that while the majority of trainees knew that the NVQ they were doing was at Level 2 (only 14 did not know), only one in three trainees were aware of the title of their NVQ (see Chapter 3).

## 5.7 Support during the job placement

As noted above in Section 5.2, trainees were generally very positive about the support they had received from their supervisors and work colleagues. Although most (52) said they had had a mentor, in many cases this was not a mentor in the way it had been conceived and put forward by Deloitte. Thus, in 13 cases, trainees said that their supervisors or team leaders acted as their mentor, while in others (26 trainees) it was someone working alongside them in the same team. Very rarely – only in 13 cases – was the mentor said to be someone who worked in a different area or department. While interviewees were generally positive about the support they had received from their mentor, those who did have such an ‘external’ contact tended to be more satisfied with the support they had received. As one trainee explained:

*Yes, I had a mentor (...). He didn't work in the same department as me, he worked across the road at another (...) building. We met weekly at the end of each week. Seeing him was extremely useful, it helped me to see how important it was keeping control of myself in every situation and deciding what to say in certain situations, to handle customers correctly.*

There was also divergence as to the extent to which trainees had ‘formal’ meetings with their mentors – in many of the cases in which supervisors or work colleagues acted as mentors, no formal meetings took place because, as one respondent explained, ‘I see them every day, all the time anyway’. In most cases, these mentors were perceived more as ‘on-the-job coaches’, providing support in helping the trainee if they got stuck with their work. However, even these mentors were often said to have been very supportive, as one trainee reported:

*It's been very useful. I would say the buddy that I've got has been an absolute star; I couldn't have asked for any more support. It's been much less stressful having a buddy like that; I don't think I would have lasted as long as I have without my buddy there.*

## 5.8 Links with college during the job placement

Trainees in seven of the nine colleges were required to attend college for a half day (six colleges) or a whole day (one college) each week during most of their placement. In one college, this arrangement had only been put in place for the

last two months of the placement, while in the other trainees had come into college at first weekly and then later at more irregular intervals.

Most of the trainees (40) said they had attended all college sessions and that their employers had always given them the flexibility to take the time off to do so. As one interviewee explained:

*They've never refused to let me come in on a Wednesday. It was agreed that I would need to do it and they've kept to it. Also, if I need to come off the help desk to do some college work, then [the company] will allow me. I just ask my mentor, and they never say no, as long as I give them some notice.*

Eight interviewees said they had missed several days in college because of sickness, while five said they had done so because they were '*doing something important at work*'. Just under one in six trainees (nine) admitted that they did not attend college on a regular basis. In most cases, interviewees explained that they did not enjoy the college work and this was the main reason why they had not attended. Others said that it was due to transport problems or not getting on with college staff. Seven trainees admitted that they took a day off instead of going to college.

Almost all the trainees that attended college regularly and some of those that had missed days due to sickness or work commitments (41 interviewees in total) were generally very positive about this requirement. Respondents mainly appreciated this for giving them the time and help to complete their NVQ, to give them an opportunity to reflect on what they had learned in their placement and to mix with their friends. In the words of one trainee:

*I think it was very useful; 90% of it was useful for the NVQ, because half the stuff I didn't understand and 10% of it is useful for ourselves, because we have group discussions and talk about what each of us does in our workplace. So we get more of an idea of what it's like to work at different companies.*

Unsurprisingly, negative comments were made by eight of those not attending regularly. It is worth noting that just under one-fifth of interviewees (12) expressed mixed views on the usefulness of attending college during the placement. Most of these said that they would rather have spent more time in the workplace, as one trainee explained: '*The extra time for the NVQ has been*

*useful, but I think it would be better to be at work and gaining more experience’.*

It is also worth noting that when asked most trainees said that they had not spoken to a careers advisor since joining the e-skills4industry course. Only in three colleges did any trainees (six in total) report speaking to a careers adviser since starting the course, but this was not necessarily in college or linked to the course. For instance, one trainee said *‘Yes, I approached the careers office here at college just before Christmas but they fobbed me off for some reason, so I went to Connexions and they were much more helpful’.* Just under one-quarter of trainees said that they would have liked to have spoken to a careers advisor. This was seen as especially relevant to those respondents who had been told they would not be offered a job at their placement company.

## **5.9 Key observations**

- Almost all trainees were satisfied with their job placement experience and felt that it had helped develop their skills and knowledge.
- Just under half of trainees said there was nothing they had not enjoyed about their placement. The most common reported issues related to being bored because of lack of work and having to travel a long way to their placements.
- All trainees were able to identify ways in which the college course had helped them in their placement. Many were able to identify ways in which they had used some of the IT skills and employability skills learnt in college.
- The gaps identified in the college course related to lack of practical skills such as networking and lack of opportunities to develop their customer service and telephone skills.
- Trainees were generally positive about the experience of doing the NVQ, although almost a third had found it difficult to complete it while working at the same time. Most interviewees valued having a half-day in college during their placement to help them complete the NVQ.
- Most trainees had a workplace mentor and felt they had benefited from their support. However, contrary to the guidelines provided to employers, in most cases trainees’ supervisors or team leaders acted as their mentors.
- Few trainees had spoken to a careers advisor, although just under one-quarter would liked to have done so.

## 6. Employers' views and experiences of the 6-month job placement

This chapter is based on telephone interviews conducted with 32 of the 52 employers involved in providing placements as part of the e-skills4industry programme. Those interviewed were mainly placement supervisors, who had been directly involved in overseeing the trainees' work and progress and who had also been the contacts for college staff for routine visits and if any problems had arisen. Some had also acted as mentors to trainees and a small number of those interviewed had been mentors only. A minimum of three employers were contacted working with each of the nine colleges that were running the course. The 32 supervisors had contact with a total of 45 trainees, of which all but three had done both their 2-week work and their 6-month job placements with the same employer.

### 6.1 Employer expectations

The interviewees did not seem to have been expecting much in the way of **IT skills and knowledge** when the trainees started, but they were mainly looking for a **positive attitude and a willingness to learn**. The following response was typical of many:

*We were not expecting too many technical or work-based skills. We were looking for someone who had the right kind of attitude and was willing to learn. They were the more important skills.*

The employers recruited to the scheme had generally seen an outline of the college course, and so felt that the trainees would have enough basic IT skills to survive and that they would be able to build on these skills fairly quickly if they had the right attitude. One respondent stated that he had expected that the trainees would '*become independent after three months of the 6-month job placement*'. This expectation was explored in more detail when the employers were asked to judge whether they had originally thought the trainees would prove to be a valuable asset or perhaps a drain on company resources and time. Most interviewees said that they had been of the opinion that they

would have to spend quite a lot of time and effort initially, but that this would be repaid later on when the trainees became capable of independent work. There was also the long-term view that this was an investment for the future. One of the employers explained this in the following way:

*We take on placements regularly; we know it's an investment in the future, but appreciate that it is a drain on our time. What happens is you put in the time initially and you get pay-back later along the line.*

It is also worth noting that some of those interviewed were quite concerned that anyone should even assume that taking a trainee would be any sort of burden on their company, as reflected in this comment:

*We wanted to do the project; we wanted to be involved and certainly didn't see supporting [the trainee] as a burden.*

The attitude towards the placement, therefore, had been generally both realistic and optimistic and this optimism was seen by most employers to have been justified when they were asked if their views had changed as a result of the placement. The majority remained very positive about the value of placements. In one particular case, there had even been a change from a previously apprehensive attitude towards a much more positive one, as revealed by this employer's remark:

*Yes, I've changed round completely. I've reversed my position because I am so pleased with the outcome, so pleased with the student.*

On the other hand, some employers had discovered that the reality of taking a trainee was tougher than they had expected, as this comment showed:

*I didn't expect the drain on time to be such a heavy load during the 12-week lead-in. The trainee I was dealing with didn't have the soft skills. On reflection, I think I was a little naïve on how much time would be required; there were punctuality issues, there were telephone manner issues and dealing with customer issues. The trainee I was involved with needed a lot of input.*

It should be emphasised, however, that such responses were very much in a minority, and that even some of those who had faced problems with their trainees still thought offering placements was worthwhile. This attitude was reflected in this interviewee's comment:

*We have had difficulties with some employees and with some trainees; I still value having work placement trainees.*

## **6.2 Preparation for the job placement**

The factor that had most helped employers to prepare for the trainees' arrival was said to be the **college briefing session**. The importance of the briefing was described by this respondent:

*The seminar at the college for employers was the most valuable in preparing us. It helped because we met the college people. I was the only employer to turn up so I had complete availability of all the college staff to talk to.*

By contrast, in those cases in which colleges had not organised a briefing, employers had sometimes had difficulty adapting to an unfamiliar situation, as revealed by this response:

*We struggled to know what sort of contract we would be working under and how formal to make it and I think we needed more guidance from the college. Their response when asked about payment and contract was to say that it varied from company to company. We would have liked our responsibilities, the terms and conditions, the payment amounts, the sick pay, the holiday entitlement, all to be much firmer in place.*

It is also worth noting that several employers, including some of those who had attended a briefing session, felt the need for **more information on the NVQ** and how they could best support it, as this interviewee explained:

*We would have liked to know more about the NVQ and what tasks our student needed to fulfil, e.g. to have received an NVQ pack all about the NVQ in-depth would have been useful.*

Only ten interviewees said that either they or someone in their company had attended **mentor training**. The remaining supervisors had either not been aware of the availability of such training (14 supervisors) or had decided to not attend or send anyone from their company (eight supervisors). Analysis of the data showed regional variance in the take-up and awareness of mentor training. In four areas, none of those interviewed had been involved. In one of these areas, employers were not aware of any offer of such training. There

were also areas where some employers had received training, but others said they knew nothing about it. It is possible that this may have been the result of the information from the colleges not always filtering down to the appropriate staff.

Most of those who had attended, or had sent someone for, training said they were satisfied with it. Only one respondent pointed out that such '*training can't be done in a couple of hours. Maybe the college thought they could get away with a couple of hours training, but I don't think it was sufficient*'. It is also worth noting that some of those who had not attended a training session expressed disappointment, as they felt that this would have been of benefit to them. One interviewee explained that, '*there was talk of mentor training, but it never happened. I would have liked to have been involved; it would have been useful to have had that*'. However, not all employers felt the need for much preparation. Some had a lot of experience in dealing with trainees and some were quite happy to accept full responsibility for their trainees in their own way. This attitude was summed up by one employer who stated:

*I didn't need any prior briefing. I knew the college course had given them a reasonable background and once they were delivered to me I accepted the responsibility of taking them on.*

### **6.3 Employers' experiences of the job placement**

The type of work the trainees were said to have worked in fell into three main categories:

- general helpdesk and first line support (mainly telephone work)
- practical technician work, such as building PCs, repairing laptops, installing software
- support analyst work, which combined a mixture of the two.

The majority of the 45 job placements referred to here fell into the first category.

Almost all the trainees were described as having **adapted well to the workplace** and some interviewees said that they thought the college course had definitely helped in this respect. Others also felt that there was an



advantage for those trainees who had part-time jobs, as they understood the workplace better. The other factors that were considered to have helped the trainees were:

- an induction, which all trainees received and which varied from one day to three. Some employers also provided a longer lead-in with the shadowing of an experienced employee.
- the familiarity gained from the 2-week work placement, which had enabled them to meet colleagues and overcome ‘*some of their initial nervousness*’.

This positive response was not universal, but it was only a minority who created the type of poor impression described by this employer:

*One didn't adapt very well, had punctuality problems, didn't seem to settle, shirked jobs that required hard work and didn't seem to have the right attitude.*

Some supervisors, who had contact with more than one trainee, were able to comment on the difference between individuals from the same college. One explained how, ‘*one trainee found it difficult to accept that he didn't know something and he would attempt to cover it up. The other learnt early on that if he didn't know something, he should say so*’. This reinforced what many interviewees had said originally about attitude being more important than particular IT skills.

While the **level of responsibility** trainees’ were given was said to depend on their individual attitudes and capabilities, most employers saw the three-month mid-point as a significant turning point for increasing the amount of independent work the trainee was given. The following description of the trainee’s development was typical of other respondents:

*Over the last two months we've let him go out on his own and deal with problems on his own with internal customers. That's quite a significant step. We were confident that he would do a good job and he did.*

Most supervisors were not only satisfied with the **standard of work** being carried out by trainees, but some found that trainees were exceeding their expectations, as this employer remarked:

*I would say the trainee has matched the progress we'd have expected of a normal employee in that same amount of time, which is a great step for him considering his start point.*

There were some trainees who did not achieve the same standards and ten of them were judged by their employers to have not met their expectations. In most cases, this was the result of poor attitude and lack of application, rather than inability to cope with the work. One interviewee complained how:

*Even two months into the placement, I was still asking [the trainee] to take games off his system. On that issue, if he had been a regular employee, he'd have been dismissed before he got to that point.*

Although the majority of employers seemed to be very pleased with the standard of work achieved by their trainees, there were comments from half the interviewees on the **lack of initiative** shown by some of the trainees. One supervisor summed up this view, when he said: *'They needed things spelling out to them in detail that was beyond what you might expect'*. Other interviewees referred to the need to encourage trainees to take up another task once the current one had been completed or to volunteer to help others. These comments were made both by employers who felt their trainees had had successful placements as well as by those who were less satisfied overall. Many employers thought this lack of initiative resulted from low confidence, from being much younger than the average employee, or from having come straight from school and therefore being not used to taking responsibility for their own work.

When asked about any **other particular problems** with the trainees, employers dealing with about half the 45 placements reported no problems at all. Others reported fairly minor issues, such as difficulty coping with pressure, or not being sufficiently proactive. About 15 employers reported more serious issues that had required their active involvement, of which the most common were punctuality and attendance. While most absences for ill-health were considered genuine, there were some who felt trainees sometimes *'opted out of work too readily'*. Of greater concern was the issue of trainees who failed to inform the company if they were not coming into work. There were also examples of absenteeism from college, as this employer reported about a trainee who already had a poor attendance record at work:

*We also discovered accidentally when ringing the college on one occasion that he wasn't attending college when we had released him from his workplace, which was a concern.*

Other negative comments concerned lack of appropriate behaviour or general immaturity, as described by this employer:

*I've had a few problems with one trainee. It's often been related to immature behaviour, rather than IT skills. I would describe it as school-type behaviour that was inappropriate in the workplace.*

Employers faced with these challenges had usually informed the college and this had resulted in a positive response from the trainee, but in a few cases the improvement was short-lived, as this employer reported:

*I informed the college and they did have a word with him and tried to make him buck his ideas up. To be honest, they couldn't cope with him either.*

There was only one case where a trainee had been dismissed because 'he had a punctuality and attitude problem. He started in July, he lasted until October and then we got rid of him'.

**Contact between employers and colleges** varied considerably, depending on the system that each college had established, but most employers were happy with the situation. Even though some employers said they had little regular contact, this was not seen as a problem by many of them as they had felt able to speak to college staff if this was needed. However, there were five who expressed concern about a lack of contact, as this supervisor explained:

*It was probably insufficient because we would have liked more information about the NVQ requirements. Perhaps if visits had been made once a month that would have helped and prompted us into finding our focus with this trainee.*

There was particular praise for one college, which had set up meetings between the three employers they were using, with each employer and trainee visiting the workplace of the others. This was seen to be a very successful initiative, and could be recommended to colleges for future practice, although it could be quite time-consuming for college staff to set up. One of the employers involved explained how:

*This we found very beneficial, to the extent that we have retained our student for a further six months and also taken one of the trainees from one of the other companies for a six-month period.*

None of the employers had found any particular difficulty in having a 16-18 year old on a placement in relation to Child Protection legislation. There were some implications in terms of extra risk assessments and paper work, but nothing of real significance.

## **6.4 Supporting the trainee during the job placement**

All the employers reported that all trainees had a mentor assigned to them and that these had been chosen because:

- they had special responsibilities or experience in training
- they had volunteered
- it was seen as a good staff development opportunity.

Overall, interviewees said that mentors had benefited from their involvement. However, several respondents reported that the role was sometimes more challenging than expected. While the level of difficulty depended on the attitude of the individual trainee, there were three issues which were highlighted:

- the problem of combining mentoring duties with a full workload
- being a friendly supportive figure, but also addressing issues
- not being sure of company policy in disciplining someone who was not an employee.

Employers had been advised that the person acting as mentor should be different from the trainees' supervisor. However, there was clear evidence from both the trainee and supervisor interviews that this advice had not been adhered to in many cases. Interviews suggested that this had led to some problems, for example where a trainee who had complaints about the way he was treated by his supervisor could not ask for advice from his mentor.

## 6.5 Employers' views and experiences of the NVQ

All the employers were aware that the NVQ was part of the e-skills4industry course, but there was variation in how much they knew about it and how satisfied they felt with the level of information provided. Most colleges had provided a briefing about the requirements of the NVQ and this was generally considered useful, but some employers felt that they could have been given more information. One stated:

*I don't think we were informed clearly, probably because it's part of a pilot. I would have liked much clearer objective setting and a much clearer outline of each party's responsibilities.*

More than half of the supervisors interviewed (19) had no previous experience of NVQs, while 13 had at least some. This confirms previous research which suggests that employers in sectors other than manufacturing are often not aware of the nature or purpose of Apprenticeship and NVQs.<sup>3</sup> However, interviews with supervisors suggested that most thought the NVQ was a valuable part of the course for the trainees as it was seen as taking them 'through the paces of being at the workplace. It's really good for training people and provides a good base'. Several employers had offered trainees extended contracts beyond the 6-month job placement to enable them to complete the NVQ. One interviewee explained their rationale for doing so:

*As with any flavour of education, we feel it is important to complete the course, as it shows an ability to learn and dedication to see things through. We have made it one of the conditions of them carrying out a further six months with us that they complete all modules.*

However, several supervisors also made critical comments relating to the NVQ. Thus, some interviewees thought that trainees gained more from actually doing the job than they did from doing the qualification. Others thought that the NVQ missed out particular elements relevant to the workplace:

*What NVQs lack is providing realistic situations as part of the learning process, particularly in terms of communication elements, how to present and how to problem solve, but I accept these specific areas are*

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<sup>3</sup> SPIELHOFER, T. and SIMS, D. (2004). 'Modern apprenticeships: hitting the target?' *Education + Training*, **46**, 3, 112-18.

*hard to teach. They are intangibles that come through the experience of doing work.*

It was clear from the responses of employers, that some had provided **considerable support for their trainees** to help them achieve the NVQ. There were seven who reported that their trainees had required ‘*a lot of support*’. One explained that:

*We were involved in all the paperwork – the signing, the counter-signing, and I think we’ve only seen half of it. We made sure that the criteria he needed were matched by the roles we gave him and the tasks we gave him. So we sent him to different teams to get the experience he needed.*

However, the majority of employers felt that the responsibility rested with the college and the individual trainee, but they had **provided guidance and assistance** when asked. Some of these were complimentary about the ways the trainees had tackled their tasks. As one interviewee reported ‘*he was quite creative in terms of how he gathered his information – using a digital camera at one point*’.

However, a few supervisors felt that they should have been given more information about the NVQ earlier on, including what support they could provide, as this comment showed:

*Once we realised the trainee needed to do a lot of work, we did put together a development plan aimed at helping him do his NVQ. Although he agreed to follow the plan, he didn’t and I think we perhaps expected too much of him and by that point it was a lot to do in a short space of time.*

## **6.6 Supervisors’ views of the e-skills4industry course**

Most employers said they were satisfied with the breadth of the course and particularly its attempt to improve trainees’ soft skills. However, interviewees wanted even greater emphasis on:

- customer service skills
- telephone manner
- behaviour in the workplace
- interpersonal skills.

As the trainees were young and most had very little previous experience of the workplace, employers thought that giving them as much practice as possible in these areas, for example, by using role plays, was essential. One interviewee described how he had tackled a lack of customer service skills:

*When they did arrive, I did role-play calls to them until they got it right. With one of them I remember doing ten calls one after the other until he got the right manner.*

As discussed in Chapter 5, many of the trainees themselves had identified a need for more work on customer service skills. Furthermore, one college had brought in the trainees during a half-term holiday to do an extra telephone skills course and the trainees were said to have responded very positively to this.

Although standards of **numeracy and literacy** were not seen as major concerns by the employers, a number did feel that **verbal communication** skills needed improving and some said they had needed to coach trainees in writing e-mails to customers and to monitor their output quite carefully.

Releasing trainees to attend college was not considered to have been disruptive and as they had agreed to this from the beginning, employers had been prepared for it. What had been an issue for a few was discovering that trainees had not actually been attending college when they should have done. One complained that, *'he didn't turn up for a lot of college sessions; we didn't know it, but found out when we contacted the college on another matter'*.

## 6.7 Outcomes

### 6.7.1 Outcomes for trainees

The interviewees were asked if they had been expecting at the start of the 6-month job placement to be able to offer a permanent post to the right trainee, and almost two-thirds (19 employers) said that they had expected to do so. In the end, 17 had offered further work to at least one trainee. Of these:

- eight had offered a full-time position to at least one trainee
- six had offered an extension of the placement (which might lead to a full-time post)

- three had offered a job, but it had not been accepted by the trainee.

Of the remaining 15 employers who had not offered any further employment:

- six had not done so because the trainee was thought not to be up to the required standard
- three had not done so because of a company freeze on recruitment
- six said there had never intended to offer a full-time position and they had been offering the placement only.

It is worth noting that among the eight employers who had offered a full-time position there was one who said that originally no post had been available, but the quality of the trainee was judged to be so good that a job was offered.

As regards the trainees who had been offered a short-term extension, the employers seemed quite hopeful that this might lead to a full-time position in the future, as one interviewee explained:

*He's been offered a six-month extension, which gives us more time to assess this particular trainee. If he proves himself as an effective member of the team, who has taken on board all the training we've offered, I think there will be a job for him at the end of his next six months.*

Almost all the employers were very positive about how much trainees had learnt as a result of their placements, drawing attention in particular to:

- IT skills
- customer service skills
- workplace requirements
- personal development.

Some expressed great satisfaction at the transformation they had seen in the young people. One employer thought that the trainee he had worked with had '*moved on phenomenally – he is a lot more efficient in our company and more confident in himself*'. Another commented on how his trainee's '*improvement has been dramatic because he is now at the level of a team member*'.



There were only four of the 45 trainees who were felt to have learnt nothing, or very little from their placement. A few employers had been in the interesting position of having two trainees who had developed in completely different directions. For example, one interviewee described how *‘one trainee has learnt very little, while the other has learnt a lot’*. The main reason given for this was that the latter’s positive attitude and willingness to apply himself to his work.

There was a similarly favourable response from employers on changes in **trainees’ behaviour and attitudes** over the course of the placement. Reference was made in particular to trainees’:

- increased self-motivation
- ability to work independently
- ability to deal with challenges
- self-confidence
- ability to cope with the cultural change from college-based study to *‘real-life work’*
- improved punctuality
- improved attendance.

A number of interviewees commented on the way they had seen their trainees *‘grow’* during the course of the placement from hesitant and immature trainees to reliable and confident employees, and that this was not only a benefit for the trainee, but also for the company.

### **6.7.2 Gains for the organisation**

Most employers reported that their organisation had also benefited from practical help, once the trainees could work independently. Altogether, 22 of the 45 trainees were thought to have provided genuine assistance in the form of freeing up more experienced staff and helping to meet targets. For example, one interviewee spoke of having gained *‘two extra members of staff’*, and another said, *‘it certainly freed up our more experienced technicians to go and do more challenging work’*.

There were a lot of references to **staff development opportunities** which had resulted from the placements, both for supervisors and mentors, with this response being quite common: *‘It’s given me experience of having a younger*

*person as a member of staff to manage*'. One respondent explained in some detail how both he and his colleagues had gained from their experience of overseeing a trainee:

*When we deal with things that face us, we haven't always got a procedure for it in place. So to have someone new there and to explain it to them, often brings our awareness that we may need to have a procedure in place. We've now got software to put in our procedures and so we've now started to collect a central vault.*

Others also referred to the way in which teaching a skill to someone helped their own understanding, or that they had now reflected more on the importance of training within the company.

The e-skills4industry programme was also seen as a valuable means of changing attitudes to **staff recruitment**. Thus, some interviewees felt it had opened up a new area of potential employment, as this comment showed:

*I am questioning how right we are in only taking graduates into IT. We have been taking on people with A-levels and I'm wondering now if even that level of prior qualification is valid.*

Another benefit in this area, mentioned by several interviewees, was the opportunity to see if a potential employee was likely to be a good investment, or to '*try before you buy*', as one employer put it.

**Building a relationship with a local college** and being able to influence future developments was perceived as another positive outcome. One interviewee was enthusiastic about how, '*the course has given us an opportunity to input on the e-skills course and even to tailor what we want from the course. To have such a flexible relationship is very valuable*'. Some had hardly been aware that there was a large college in their area, but now saw the potential mutual benefit of forging a relationship.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that some employers simply saw the presence of young people as having '*added value to their department*'. Interviewees provided various examples of the way in which this could happen. Examples included that it was simply interesting, '*to have the views of younger people contributing to our team talks*', or that it was a pleasure to

see, *‘someone young learn the skills that you’ve already got with such enthusiasm’*.

## 6.8 Future involvement in the programme

Almost all employers said that they would offer a placement to an e-skills4industry trainee again – only two thought that they would not do so because of lack of time. Similarly, 31 supervisors said that they would recommend the programme to other employers. Particularly strong selling points of the programme from their point of view included that:

- employers can *‘mould these trainees into the role they wish’*
- the trainees have not *‘already developed bad habits that you have to undo’*
- there is the opportunity *‘to try before you buy’*, which is very unusual in employment
- you have the backing of the college, whereas with a temp or a new employee, there would not normally be any other *‘back-up’*
- *‘the quality of the college course and having an input to it helps to make these trainees fit into the business world’*
- *‘it gives a young person a second chance, even though they might not have done well at school. They might not be academic, they might not have GCSEs, but this course shows that they aren’t write-offs. They can take on a business role and gain from the experience, even though they may not be qualified initially to do so’*
- involvement in the programme fitted in with companies wanting to do something out of a sense of *‘social responsibility’*
- the programme had opened up *‘new areas of recruitment not considered before’*
- *‘it doesn’t cost a lot of money to try it out’*.

## 6.9 Key observations

- College briefing sessions were seen as an important factor for preparing employers for the trainees’ arrival, although not all employers had attended these sessions. Overall, employers reported that they would have liked more information on the NVQ before the placement started.
- Supervisors reported that almost all trainees had adapted well to the workplace and almost half were seen, by the end of the placement, as exceeding their expectations by providing real help to the company.

- Only a minority of employers had attended mentor training sessions provided by some of the colleges. This may explain why several supervisors ended up acting as mentors rather than delegating this role to another member of staff. There was evidence that this had led to some conflicts of interest.
- Most work placement supervisors saw the NVQ as a valuable part of the course and none saw the qualification as burdensome. While only seven interviewees had needed to provide a lot of support to trainees, several said that they would have liked to have done more to help them complete the NVQ.
- Most interviewees were satisfied with the content of the e-skills4industry college course and valued its attempt at developing trainees' soft skills. However, reflecting trainees' own views, they saw a need for a greater emphasis on customer service and telephone skills.
- While almost two-thirds of employers had expected to offer a job at the end of the placement, only just over half had actually done so. Main reasons for not offering a job included a company freeze on recruitment and lack of satisfaction with the performance of the trainee.
- Most supervisors were able to identify gains to their own organisation of having taken on a trainee and almost all said they would be willing to be involved in the programme in the future. All but one supervisor said they would recommend the programme to other employers.

## 7. Outcomes

This chapter presents the outcomes of the whole e-skills4industry programme for the trainees. It is based on interviews with 62 trainees towards the end of the 6-month job placement, 14 college staff and 32 job placement supervisors. The 32 employers interviewed covered companies where 45 trainee job placements had taken place. This chapter also draws on data from colleges which was made available by Deloitte in the second half of April 2005 and which detailed the characteristics and destinations of 142 trainees accepted onto the course.

### 7.1 Trainee destinations and future aspirations

Fifty-two companies provided 6-month job placements to 70 e-skills4industry trainees. Of these trainees, more than half (38 trainees) had continued working in IT after their placement (as of June 2005). Only five of them were employed by a company other than the one where they had completed their job placement.

When interviewed towards the end of their placements, only 24 trainees knew either that they would not be offered a job or that this was unlikely. However, even those who were not going to be offered a job continued to be optimistic and did not feel too disappointed. As one trainee said, *'That's life. I just have to go and try other places'*. It is therefore not surprising that some trainees had, by April 2005, found employment outside the placement companies.

Around five in six trainees reported that they would like to be working in IT in three years time. One trainee said *'I would like to be working in a big company like the one I am in now (..) and learning about different IT systems, so I would be knowledgeable enough to get a job anywhere in IT'*. Thirteen trainees had not decided what they would be doing in three years time or envisaged being in education, in non-IT jobs or said they simply wanted to be in any good or permanent job.

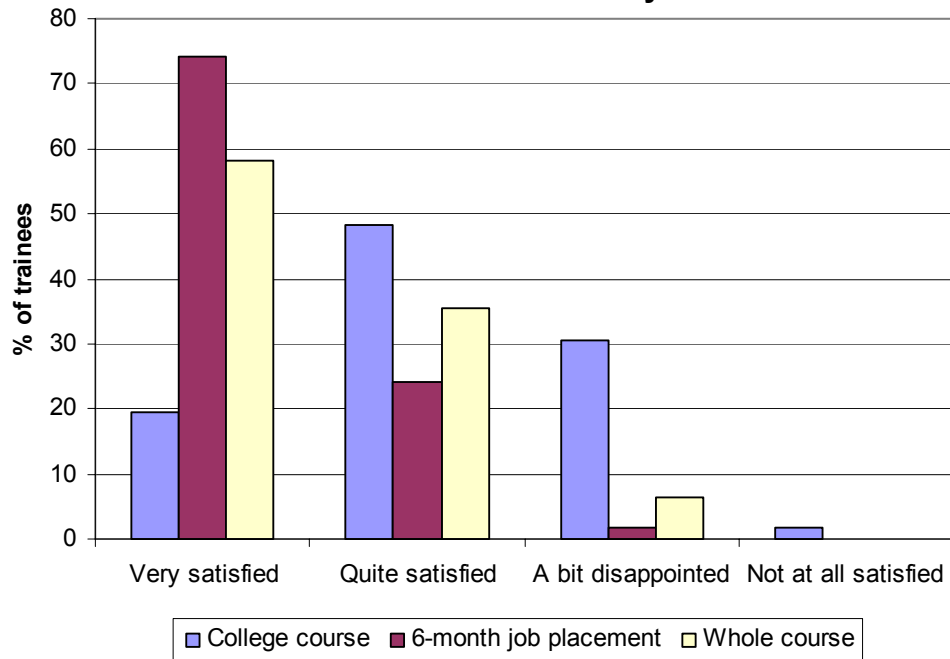
There was no noticeable change in trainees' future plans and aspirations compared with when they were first interviewed at the start of the course. However, in some cases, trainees' ideas about future plans had become more concrete. One trainee, who in the initial interview stated he wanted to be '*an IT professional*', was more specific towards the end of the 6-month placement and talked about '*working as the manager of a helpdesk area*' in three years time. It is also worth noting that some trainees still maintained very optimistic hopes, including, for example, one interviewee who said he would like to be working as '*a big IT manager, with a BMW and a large house*'.

## **7.2 Trainee satisfaction with the course**

The 62 trainees interviewed were asked how satisfied they were with the whole course (the college course, the work placement and the job placement). The majority were either 'very satisfied' (36 trainees) or 'quite satisfied' (22 trainees). Only four were 'a bit disappointed', mainly due to feeling the course was disorganised or being dissatisfied with the NVQ. In addition, most trainees (58) thought that they had made the right decision when they joined the course, mainly because the course had improved their chances of getting a good job or had helped them gain useful skills, experience and qualifications. One trainee said: '*now I have a lot of qualifications in IT and hardware and software. I've got more skills. Now I know how to work in a business environment*'.

As far as different components of the course are concerned, trainees were most satisfied with the 6-month job placement and least satisfied with the college course (shown in Figure 3). Overall, the high level of satisfaction with the job placement appeared to have compensated for the lower levels of satisfaction with the college component of the e-skills4industry course. Indeed, when talking about the whole course, one trainee explained that he was very satisfied because '*the job placement has been so good, it has made up for the problems with the college course*'.

**Figure 3 Satisfaction with e-skills4industry course**



Source: NFER Evaluation of the e-skills4industry national roll-out, 2005  
N = 62 trainees interviewed towards the end of their 6-month placements

This data is consistent with the finding that half of the trainees named the 6-month job placement when asked about the most useful parts of the course. Reasons given for this included the fact that the placement ‘gives you a real feel for what it’s like to be a proper employee’. However, many trainees also felt that the IT skills (28 trainees) and the employability skills (17 trainees) covered in college were amongst the most useful parts of the e-skills4industry course. In contrast, a sizeable proportion of trainees (35 trainees) mentioned Key Skills when asked about the least useful part of the course. One said ‘Key Skills because it’s kids’ stuff and took up time when we could have been doing technical skills’.

### 7.3 Trainee retention

Trainee retention on the course was examined based on data made available by colleges at the end of April 2005. The information concerned 142 trainees who had originally been accepted on the e-skills4industry course across the nine colleges. It is worth noting that seven of these trainees never started or attended the course; a further 66 had left either during the college course or during the placement. This means that just under half (69) of those originally

accepted onto the course across the nine colleges completed the full programme, including the 6-month job placement.

The recorded reasons for the 66 trainees who left the course prematurely were (with more than one reason having been recorded for some trainees):

- moving or intending to move to another course (14 trainees)
- personal reasons (e.g. health issues) (13 trainees)
- attendance, attitude or behavioural issues (12 trainees). In some cases there is indication that the trainee was asked to leave the course due to such issues
- disliking the course or course tutors (seven trainees)
- not having secured a 6-month job placement (six trainees)
- moving or wanting to move into employment (five trainees)
- choosing not to take up a 6-month job placement (four trainees)
- achievement on the course (two trainees)
- other individual reasons (eight trainees).

Of the 142 trainees accepted onto the course, nine were female. Of these, seven trainees left the course. The main reason for this was moving to another course (four trainees). The other reasons why individual females left were being the only female, lacking confidence to do the 6-month job placement and being asked to leave due to behavioural issues.

Trainees with one or two GCSEs A\*-C appeared to be more likely to stay on the course than those with few or no qualifications (shown in Table 2). In addition, those who had the most qualifications (three or more GCSEs A\*-C) when accepted onto the course were more likely to leave the course than to complete it. This appears to have been partly due to some 'overqualified' trainees having moved onto other, higher level, courses at an early stage or at the end of the college course.



**Table 2 Retention and initial qualifications of trainees accepted onto e-skills4industry**

	<b>Trainees who left e-skills4industry</b>	<b>Trainees who remained on e-skills4industry</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>3 or more GCSEs A*-C or equivalent</b>	22	16	38
<b>1 or 2 GCSEs A*-C or equivalent</b>	19	28	47
<b>No GCSEs A*-C, but at least 1 GCSE D-G or equivalent</b>	17	19	36
<b>No previous qualifications or Only GCSEs Grade F,U or equivalent</b>	7	3	10
<b>No data available</b>	8	3	11
<b>Total =</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>142</b>

*Source: NFER Evaluation of the e-skills4industry national roll-out, 2005*

*Data provided by colleges at the end of April 2005*

*N = 142 trainees accepted onto e-skills4industry course*

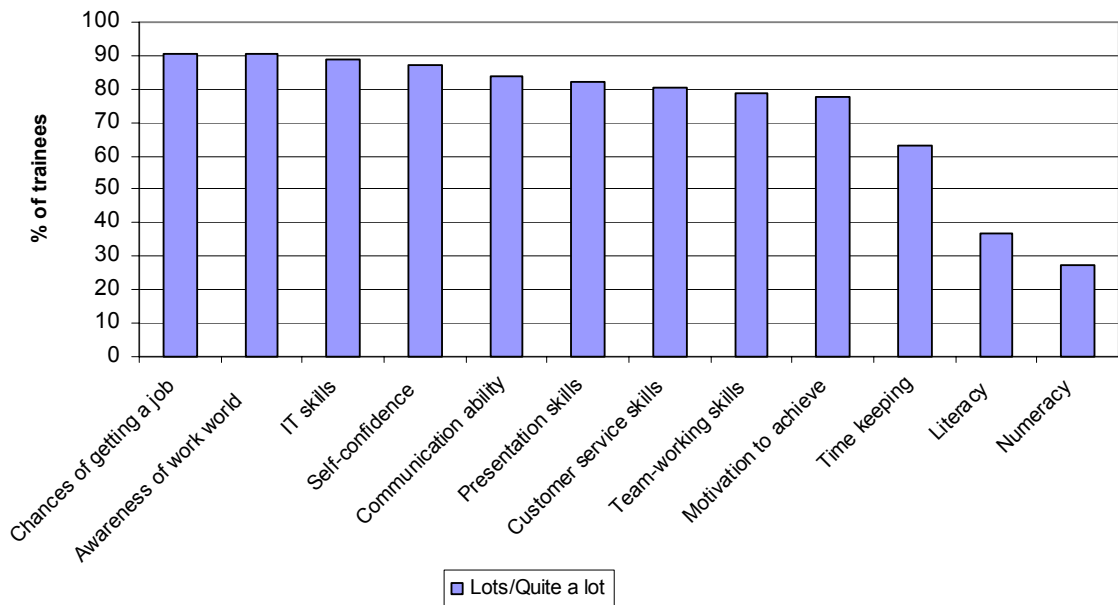
In eight of the nine colleges, all trainees who had applied for the course were requested to complete tests which aimed to measure their aptitude for IT using advanced diagnostic tools (provided by SHL). Analysis carried out by SHL suggested that trainees who had performed well on these tests were significantly more likely to complete the course. However, there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate any clear correlation between performance in the test and subsequent employment outcomes.

## **7.4 Trainee skills, knowledge and personal development**

In response to an open question about how they had changed since they started the course, almost half of the trainees (25 trainees) reported feeling more confident. Many felt they had become more mature (19 trainees) and more knowledgeable or experienced (18 trainees). In addition, some said that their social and interpersonal skills (11 trainees) had improved and that they felt they were now more determined or motivated to achieve (eight trainees). One trainee said: ‘Yes [I have changed], I am more confident, I know more about computers and I’m more determined. I know what I want to do and how to get on’. Other gains (identified by five or fewer trainees) included greater awareness of the world of work and better communication skills.

The majority of trainees also felt that the course had impacted at least ‘quite a lot’ on a series of skills and personal characteristics about which they were specifically asked in a closed question (shown in Figure 4). Most noticeably, about 90 per cent of trainees thought that the course had impacted at least ‘quite a lot’ on their chances of getting a job, their awareness of the world of work and their IT skills. However, noticeably fewer trainees thought that the course had the same level of impact on their literacy and numeracy, which corresponds with trainees’ low completion-rates of the Key Skills qualifications (see Section 7.5 below).

**Figure 4 Impact of the whole course on trainees**



Source: NFER Evaluation of the e-skills4industry national roll-out, 2005  
 N = 62 trainees interviewed towards the end of their 6-month job placements

As discussed in Chapter 6, most employers identified positive changes in the trainees’ attitudes, behaviour, IT skills, knowledge of workplace requirements and customer service skills. One supervisor described how the trainee’s ‘*technical knowledge has increased by leaps and bounds, for example, his networking knowledge, Windows 2000, and client knowledge.*’ Another reported a ‘*marked improvement in his punctuality – he accepted that he was in work, not in college.*’

## 7.5 Achievement of the apprenticeship

Trainees taking part on the e-skills4industry course were expected to obtain an Apprenticeship on condition that they achieved the following qualifications:

- Numeracy Key Skills Level 1
- Communications Key Skills Level 2
- the NVQ based on their 6-month job placement.

By the end of April 2005, 12 of the trainees had attained an Apprenticeship. The remaining trainees had either failed to achieve one of the three components needed to be awarded with the Apprenticeship, or not enough data were available to make a judgement on whether they would do so. The relevant data is shown in Table 3, which includes details for 69 trainees who completed the full programme and one trainee who had achieved an NVQ despite not having fully finished the 6-month job placement.

**Table 3 Trainees who completed each of the components of the Apprenticeship framework**

<b>Trainees who have/are:</b>	<b>Achieved Numeracy Level 1</b>	<b>Achieved Communications Level 2</b>	<b>Completed NVQ</b>
Achieved or completed	39	23	27
Exempt	5	6	n/a
Not attained or completed	12	22	28
No data available	14	19	15

**N = 70**

*Source: NFER Evaluation of the e-skills4industry national roll-out, 2005*

*Data provided by colleges at the end of April 2005*

*N= 70 trainees who started the work placement*

About half of the trainees interviewed indicated that achieving an Apprenticeship was important to them. These trainees tended to value the Apprenticeship because they saw it as an additional qualification, or that it would demonstrate that they have skills and knowledge. One trainee, for example, explained that *'my grades from school weren't excellent, so I want to add to my list of qualifications as many things as I can'*. Others saw it as a stepping stone to obtain further qualifications or to help them gain employment. As one trainee said *'[if you have] more certificates and more*

*experience (..) it's easier to find a job.'* However, 24 trainees either were not sure whether the Apprenticeship was important or thought that it was not that important. One trainee said: *'I wouldn't be really disappointed if I didn't get it; the more IT-based qualifications are more important to me and are more relevant than say the Key Skills'*.

## **7.6 Key observations**

- More than half of those who had completed a 6-month job placement (38 trainees) had continued working in IT after their placement and five in six trainees intended to pursue a career in IT
- Most trainees were very satisfied with the e-skills4industry programme. They were particularly pleased about the 6-month job placement, but they tended to be less enthusiastic about the college course.
- Around half of the trainees who were accepted onto the e-skills4industry course left early. Trainee retention was particularly poor for female trainees and those with the most qualifications, partly due to some moving onto other, higher level, courses.
- Trainees and placement supervisors indicated various positive impacts of the 6-month job placement and college course. Amongst the gains identified were increases in confidence, IT skills and knowledge and experience.
- By the end of April 2005, only 12 of the trainees had attained an Apprenticeship, although many more had achieved one or two of its components. About half of the trainees valued achieving an Apprenticeship because they saw it as an additional qualification that would demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

## **8. Conclusions and implications**

This chapter assesses the main conclusions and measured outcomes of the evaluation of the e-skills4industry national roll-out and makes recommendations on what factors need to be taken into consideration for the future development of the programme.

### **8.1 Assessing the success of the e-skills4industry national roll-out**

The evaluation has identified several very positive outcomes of the programme. These include:

- a very high satisfaction rate among participants with the overall programme (94 per cent) and the 6-month job placements (98 per cent)
- a lower, but still, high satisfaction rate with the college course (67 per cent)
- a reasonably good retention rate (just under 49 per cent) compared to similar programmes aimed at under-performing or disaffected 16-18 year olds
- satisfactory destination statistics with more than half of all trainees who started a 6-month job placement finding further work in IT.

The evaluation also suggests that the current design of the programme, which involved a year in college delivering IT skills and employability skills training, coupled with a short 2-week work placement, and then a longer 6-month job placement during which trainees remained in regular contact with their college tutors, is an effective approach to ease young people's transition from college into the workplace.

### **8.2 Developing and strengthening e-skills4industry**

The evaluation identified two main areas in which e-skills4industry could be developed and strengthened. The first area concerns the very low recruitment and retention of female trainees on the programme. As detailed in Chapter 7,

only nine females were originally recruited onto the course across the nine colleges, of which seven left the course prematurely. Colleges need to consider ways in which they can attract more female trainees onto their courses and what they can do to retain them on the course.

Second, the achievement rates for the Apprenticeship at the end of the 6-month job placements (based on data collected at the end of April 2005) are very low. The data suggests that only 12 course participants had achieved the full framework, which represents only eight per cent of all young people accepted onto the course, or 17 per cent of all those (70) starting a job placement. Interviews with college staff, employers and trainees suggested that some participants were continuing to work towards achieving the Apprenticeship beyond April 2005, which may improve this statistic in the future. It is worth noting that no comparative data relating to the achievement of the Apprenticeship in IT in other settings or of programme-led Apprenticeships are currently available. However, the average completion rates for all types of Apprenticeships (at Level 2) are known to be 33 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The completion rate for the e-skills4industry course appears to have fallen far short of this figure.

It is worth noting that one of the main reasons for the lack of completion of the Apprenticeship appears to relate to large proportions of course participants failing to complete their externally assessed Key Skills qualifications. In particular, only 23 trainees had managed to achieve the Key Skills Communication at level 2 (which six were exempt from it due to previous achievements). Interviews with college staff and trainees suggested that there was a strong resistance to completing the Key Skills element of the course, which supports the findings of previous research.<sup>5</sup> While only 27 trainees had completed the NVQ so far, this qualification was valued far more highly by respondents and several hoped to continue working on it in order to complete it in the future.

These findings suggest a clear need for colleges to examine their approaches to teaching Key Skills. Evidence from the evaluation suggested that trainees were less resistant to this element of the course in those colleges which had adopted an integrated approach. In most cases, this involved teaching Key

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<sup>4</sup> KINGSTON, P. (2005). 'Trainers hit by funding cut'. *Education Guardian*. 3<sup>rd</sup> May.

<sup>5</sup> SPIELHOFER, T. and SIMS, D. (2004). 'Modern Apprenticeships in the Retail Sector: stresses, strains and support'. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 56, 4, 539-58.

Skills via a work-related project, which trainees worked on usually in groups or individually, researching information on the internet or elsewhere, and then writing up a report. The main advantages of this approach appear to be that trainees learn by doing, a lot of the learning is implicit, and trainees can see the relevance to the workplace. Colleges need to be conscious that because so many of their trainees are put off by anything that reminds them of school, it is important to 'badge' Key Skills in such a way that it is not thought of as being 'Maths' or 'English'.

### **8.3 Achieving and sustaining employer involvement**

As indicated in Chapter 3, very few colleges had managed to secure placements for all of their trainees by themselves. Interviews with college staff indicated that, in many cases, they did not have the time or staff resources to contact employers and set up placements. Furthermore, it seems clear from this evaluation that, in many cases, had it not been for the involvement of the Deloitte project management team many trainees would not have had work and job placements. The long term sustainability and relevance of the e-skills4industry programme depends on colleges being able to secure the interest and commitment of sufficient numbers of employers to offer placements and, ultimately, jobs to trainees completing the placement successfully.

The overall positive response from employers to the programme – with 31 of the 32 interviewed being willing to recommend it to other employers – is encouraging in this respect. Colleges need to be able to build on this goodwill and develop more links. To do this, college staff involved in the programme need to be allocated sufficient time to develop such links. The evaluation suggests that it may be advisable to have one designated member responsible in each college for setting up placements.

Interviews with regional partners (which included eight employers) and college staff also indicated that the need for employers to commit themselves to providing a placement up to 12 months in advance could present a serious challenge to the future success of this programme. Interviewees expressed their concern that given the current economic climate, especially within the IT sector, very few employers would be willing to make such a commitment.

This raises issues for the implementation of the e-skills4industry course as a programme-led apprenticeship, which requires colleges to secure agreement from employers that they will provide placements at the start of the college course.