EVALUATION OF THE SKILLS4INDUSTRY-RETAIL PILOT

Final Report

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Key findings and recommendations

Key findings

- The three colleges involved in the skills4industry-retail pilot had recruited a challenging group of trainees, who needed a lot of support and encouragement to keep them engaged in the course.

- The majority of trainees were not in education, employment or training (NEET) prior to joining the course. Several of them had a track record of failure, including dropping out of education and training, short-term employment, and exclusion. Drop-out rates from the course were higher than anticipated, reflecting the challenging nature of the group.

- Most trainees joined the course wanting to get a job in retail, gain work experience and achieve relevant qualifications. Many wanted to establish a career in retail and expressed ambitious goals for the future.

- The majority of trainees still involved in the skills4industry-retail pilot by the end of the summer term were satisfied with the college programme. They were particularly positive about the good relationships with their tutors and interactive teaching approaches involving team-work and role plays.

- One in five trainees felt a bit disappointed with the college programme. Their complaints related to lack of organisation of the course and too much coursework towards the end of the college programme. Some course participants did not like having to do so much written work for their portfolios and had not enjoyed the Key Skills lessons.

- Of the 48 trainees who had started on the programme, just over one quarter (14) managed to complete the 6-month job placement. Of these, eight individuals had taken up a job with their placement employers. Two other trainees were offered jobs but did not take up the positions.

- Destination data collected by the three colleges for those trainees who had not completed the course reveal that ten of these trainees had gained other job opportunities in retail and other sectors.

- The majority of trainees who had completed their 6-month placement had enjoyed the experience and developed relevant skills and qualities as a result of it. Eight trainees had completed the NVQ in Retail Operations and were likely to achieve the full Apprenticeship framework.
Recommendations

- Colleges need to adopt effective initial assessment and selection procedures to identify trainees who have the right qualities and motivation to complete the course and develop a career in retail.

- Colleges need to identify trainees’ support needs as early as possible and put in place support structures to help overcome any barriers which might prevent them from completing the course.

- Colleges need to ensure that all tutors have the skills, qualities and training to engage and motivate these types of learners.

- 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. Clear links need to be made between what is taught and its relevance to the workplace.

- Employers involved in the programme need to be committed to the ethos and purpose of the skills4industry-retail programme, including providing trainees with sufficient support to complete the NVQ and opportunities to develop their skills and gain an insight into establishing a career in the retail sector.

- Colleges need to ensure that all participants on the programme receive careers advice and guidance before the end of the placement to plan their future and to help especially those not offered a job to explore alternative opportunities in retail.
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Following the success of the e-skills4industry pilot programme, Deloitte decided to test the model in the retail sector in the form of a DfES pathfinder project. The e-skills4industry programme is a business-led cross-sector partnership project launched in September 2001 to increase employability levels among young people who are from disadvantaged communities with high levels of adult unemployment. As a result of the successful pilot in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, the IT project was rolled out on a national level across nine colleges of further education in September 2003.

The retail pathfinder aims to test out the e-skills4industry employability model in the retail sector. The retail sector was chosen in response to employers’ continuing need to recruit and retain young people with appropriate entry-level skills and qualifications for careers in the sector.

More specifically the objectives of the pathfinder were:

- to successfully deliver new employability opportunities to young people in disadvantaged London boroughs which have above average levels of adult unemployment
- to identify up to 45 young people from these boroughs with below average attainment at GCSE and provide them with the skills and qualifications they need to secure employment in the retail sector
- to provide employers in the retail sector with a stream of young recruits who have the skills, qualifications and practical experience required for entry-level jobs in the sector.

The model adopted for the retail pathfinder used a programme-led approach. It was specifically designed for young people who had decided to follow a non-academic route, and who were deemed to be at risk of unemployment or under-employment. It aimed to provide them with the skills, qualifications and experience that are needed to secure entry-level jobs in retail. The programme combined classroom training in a college of further education with project work, employability skills training, work experience and a 6-month job
placement. The trainees were expected to work towards achieving an NVQ at level 2 during their job placement which, together with their college work, would lead to the award of an Apprenticeship.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by Deloitte/Business in the Community to carry out an evaluation of the retail pathfinder between November 2003 and March 2005.

This research covers the first pilot which started in February 2004. Further courses started in September 2004 and are ongoing.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The main aim of the evaluation was to provide a comprehensive assessment of the success of the retail pilot.

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

- to examine the implementation process of the skills4industry-retail pilot
- to assess the effectiveness of the programme in developing participants’ skills and employability, helping them to achieve relevant qualifications 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 skills4industry-retail pilot was based around a longitudinal/follow-up study of all trainees on the course across the three participating colleges. The longitudinal study consisted of interviews at three distinct stages of the programme, as follows:

- at the start of the programme (February 2004)
- towards the end of the college course (May 2004)
- at the end of the 6-month job placement (January/February 2005).
As part of the first round, 40 trainees were interviewed. The NFER research team was able to re-interview 25 of these trainees as part of the second round of interviews – while some of those ‘lost’ between the two rounds were not available on the day(s) of visits, the majority had left the course and were no longer available for interview. In the final round of interviews, the NFER research team managed to interview 14 trainees. These trainees included:

- eight trainees who had completed the programme and been offered employment by their placement company
- four trainees who had completed the placement but were not offered employment (one of these had been offered a part-time job with the placement company subsequently but had not taken up the offer)
- two trainees who had not completed the placement.

Interviews with employers and college staff (see below) were used to explore other trainees’ experiences and reasons for prematurely terminating their placements.

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

- **Face-to-face interviews** with six college staff, including course tutors and college senior managers, across the three participating colleges on two separate occasions (February 2004 and May 2004); in addition, a face-to-face interview with a course manager in one of the colleges was conducted in January 2005 to get further details on reasons for drop-out.

- **Telephone interviews** with ten work placement supervisors (April 2004), who were involved in providing the 2-week work placements and had direct contact with the trainees during the placement.

- Telephone interviews with eight staff (January/February 2005), who had either supervised or had a general management relationship with trainees during their 6-month job placements.

- **Telephone interviews** with seven key partners in March 2004 and nine key partners in February 2005; these included business supporters and public sector partners, involved in setting up and developing the retail pathfinder.
1.4 Structure of the report

This final report presents the overall findings of the evaluation related to the key aims of the study. Chapter 2 outlines the characteristics and previous experiences of trainees, while Chapter 3 explores their overall views of the college course and includes a discussion of what aspects of the course they liked best and least. Chapter 4 explores trainees’ and work placement supervisors’ views and experiences of the 2-week work placement. The following two chapters present trainees’ experiences (Chapter 5) and employers’ views (Chapter 6) of the 6-month job placement. Chapter 7 presents findings on the impact of the course on trainees’ skills and development. Finally, Chapter 8 outlines the main lessons learnt from the evaluation and the implications of the research for the future development of the programme.

Appendix 1 presents case studies of three trainees with contrasting experiences of the whole programme and draws out key points raised by them.
2. **Trainees’ characteristics and previous experiences**

This chapter provides an overview of the characteristics and previous experiences of the 40 trainees who were interviewed in the first round of college visits.

### 2.1 Age, ethnicity, gender and previous achievements

**Age**

Just under two-thirds of those interviewed (29 trainees) were aged 16 or 17 years old at the time of the first interview. This indicates that the majority of participants on the skills4industry-retail pilot had only left school in the previous summer and had not managed to find work or further education or training which satisfied their needs. Otherwise, nine trainees were aged 18 and two 19 years old. The age profile was found to be evenly distributed across the three colleges.

**Ethnicity**

More than 50 per cent of trainees interviewed were Black or minority ethnic young people (BMEs). The majority of these were of either Afro-Caribbean or Bengali heritage. This relatively high proportion of BMEs was mainly due to one college having almost only Bengali trainees, reflecting the local demographics of the college.

**Gender**

The proportion of male and females was very evenly balanced across the 40 trainees interviewed, with only a slightly higher number of males (21). However, within colleges there was less of an even distribution. In two colleges, there were more males (almost twice as many), while in the other this proportion was reversed (more than twice as many females).
Previous achievements

None of the trainees interviewed had more than three GCSEs A*-C, reflecting the fact that colleges had closely adhered to recruiting trainees only within the intended target group. Otherwise, of the 40 interviewees there were:

- 3 trainees with 3 GCSEs A*-C or equivalent
- 14 trainees with 1-2 GCSEs A*-C or equivalent
- 10 trainees with no GCSEs A*-C or equivalent but at least 1 GCSE D-G
- 12 trainees with no recorded qualifications.

The level of previous achievements was not evenly distributed across the three colleges, with one college having a particularly high proportion of trainees with no qualifications (see Chapter 7 for a discussion of any possible links between previous achievements and outcomes, in terms of programme completions and secured jobs).

2.2 Trainee characteristics and previous experiences

The participants of the skills4industry-retail pilot joined the course in February 2004 from very diverse backgrounds and with a variety of previous experiences. These included dropping out of school, being excluded, persistent truanting, attending alternative school provision, casual work, part-time work, and participating in other training or college courses. Most of those interviewed (28) said they had not been in education, training or employment (NEET) prior to joining the skills4industry-retail programme. It is worth noting that the proportion of trainees who said they had been NEET did not correspond with records held by the colleges (which documented that 39 out of 40 trainees fell into this category). This could be explained by the fact that some participants may have only just become part of the NEET group prior to joining the programme, but had been engaged in other activities during the autumn term.

Several of the trainees on the course joined with a ‘track record’ of failure, including dropping out of education and training, short-term employment, and exclusion. It was sometimes very difficult to map out the ‘career histories’ of the trainees interviewed. Whilst there were some common features, what characterised most of their histories was the sporadic nature of their lives.
Trainees' characteristics and previous experiences

(since leaving school or even before that), and the tendency of many not to have done much in particular in the time since leaving school and joining the skills4industry-retail programme.

The fragmented lives of many of the trainees was well illustrated by one young man who described his own pathway since leaving school early:

*So I left school in July 2002 and did GCSEs at college. It was basically as a result of a youth worker who took on my case and we went through court to fight the Education Authority so that I would have a chance to do my GCSEs through college. After leaving the college where I did GCSEs, I did a lot of cash-in-hand type jobs. I tried a college course in September 2002 – a Youth Entry to HE course at X College. After two weeks I left; I felt I wasn’t ready for that. In June 2003 I became a Dad. In September 2003 I tried a catering course but I didn’t like the course tutoring and left that.*

Just under one-third (13) of the trainees interviewed explicitly said that they had not liked going to school – many of them had been excluded or had truanted a lot. Trainees commented on bad relationships with teachers and with other students. Others felt that the teaching styles did not suit them. Several trainees had been bullied while at school. As one trainee reported:

*School didn’t do anything for me. I couldn’t cope with the bullying. The teachers themselves were frightened; they gave no protection to the pupils. The school environment was a very threatening place. Teachers ignored and didn’t get involved with dealing with bullies. As a result, school was a very tough place to be.*

As part of the first interview, trainees were asked to rate their confidence in relation to giving presentations, time keeping, literacy and numeracy on a four-point scale ranging from ‘very confident’ down to ‘not at all confident’. The results of this item (see Figure 1) of the interview revealed that many participants lacked confidence in their numeracy skills. In particular, 14 of the 40 trainees said they were either not very confident or not at all confident, while only nine trainees felt very confident.

In contrast, trainees were surprisingly confident in their own ‘literacy’ – only two said they were not very confident and 19 felt very confident. Interestingly, only just over half (23) felt very confident in their time-keeping, although most of the others felt at least ‘quite confident’ (12), with only five saying they were not very or not at all confident. Finally, as regards giving
presentations, eight said they were not very/not at all confident, while 13 felt very confident.

**Figure 1: Trainees’ confidence in their own skills and abilities**

![Graph showing trainees' confidence levels in various skills](image)

*Source: NFER Evaluation of skills4industry-retail pilot, round 1 trainee interviews*

In some cases, trainees had experienced a great variety of part-time and casual work prior to joining the course, while others had already been engaged in full-time jobs. However, most had left their jobs for various negative reasons, including being sacked, losing interest or problems with other members of staff. The following example illustrates the variety of experiences of one young man and his inability to stick at any one of them:

*I was working at W.H.Smith’s for eight months before joining this course. But the job was limited; I felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere so I quit (…) I also used to work in a car wash. I had to attract customers in and then try and make them choose a more expensive option than perhaps they originally wanted. Physically it was really hard work as well as I had to do all the cleaning and washing. Before that I worked for Holland and Barrett. It was only for four days. I couldn’t stand it, the manager was really nasty to me.*

Only seven trainees said that their experience of work so far had been gained via their school work experience placements alone. Three trainees said that they had had no previous work experience at all.

The research sought to explore whether those trainees with previous work experience would be more able to cope with the demands of the course and work placements. Details of this analysis are provided in Chapter 7.
Interviews with college tutors confirmed the diverse previous experiences and, in some cases, challenging characteristics and attitudes of trainees participating in the skills4industry-retail programme. Some of these characteristics had only revealed themselves during the course. As one college interviewee explained at the time of the second interview:

*Each individual on the course has some degree of social limitation or living issues or social welfare issues or drug issues. We have taken on a group of individuals who admittedly have a background of lack of academic success, who have not had previous work experience, who have a certain degree of disadvantage. The problems this group had were that some had very serious sexuality issues; one had a criminal record that we only found out about at a later point; another physically threatened a member of staff; another individual was a homophobic; yet another was very angry about the treatment of Islamic people.*

Staff in all three colleges agreed that the nature and characteristics of the trainees were more challenging than they had anticipated and needed a lot of support to help them keep engaged in the course. The following chapter explores the trainee’s views and experiences of the college course.
3. Views and experiences of the college course

This chapter is based on trainees’ and college tutors’ views expressed during interviews at the beginning and end of the college course. Where relevant, it also draws on trainees’ views at the end of the placement and on interviews with key partners.

3.1 Finding out about the course

At the initial interview, trainees were asked how they had first heard about the course, and just under half of the trainees said they done so via the Connexions Service (19 trainees). Almost all of the remaining trainees (18 trainees) had found out about the course from an advertisement in the local paper, which in most cases had been spotted by a parent or relative. Other sources that were reported by individual trainees were an advertisement on the college notice board, from a friend and from a youth worker.

The number of applicants varied across the colleges and ranged from 25 applications in one college to 60 in another. The low number of applicants in two of the three colleges meant that the tutors were not able to be as selective as they would have liked. One of the tutors recognised that it was a difficult time of year to recruit trainees because many would have already enrolled on other courses with a September start. Another of the tutors felt that the recruitment process had not worked as well as expected and felt that it would have been better if the college had been able to establish better links with the Connexions Service. As it was, contact had been established quite late on and referrals had not started filtering through until much later. Several college tutors also commented on the fact that the late-start had meant that the NEET group of trainees were over-represented on the course resulting in a large proportion of trainees with serious support need and personal problems (see Section 2.2).
3.2 Initial assessment and selection

In order to gain a place on the course all prospective trainees were required to pass a standardised aptitude test. Trainees were required to get a test score of 43 or more in two of the colleges in order to be accepted on the course. The other college was able to raise the pass mark to 50 as they had a greater number of applicants. One of the tutors at this college did express concerns about raising the pass mark for the test, as they felt that some applicants who may have been just as good as those that had passed the test had been rejected at this stage. Furthermore, the tutor felt that based on first impressions some of these trainees may have actually been more motivated than the trainees that had passed the test, but they had been excluded from joining the course, solely because of their test scores.

All applicants that passed the test were then invited to attend a pre-structured interview conducted by members of college staff. The interview was seen by tutors as an opportunity to measure prospective trainees’ motivation and interest in the course and in retail work. The interview questions were standardised, although in one college one of the tutors additionally asked candidates to put forward a case as to why they should be given a place on the course.

Interviews with college tutors towards the end of the college programme raised key issues with regard to the selection method used. Respondents in all three colleges said that they were dissatisfied with the selection process used for the pilot and that they would want to use other ways of identifying the most appropriate trainees in the future. One of the problems related to the lack of sufficient numbers of trainees to choose from, which was seen as resulting from the perceived failure of Connexions to refer enough possible candidates to colleges.

College tutors made various suggestions on how the selection process could be improved in the future. One interviewee, for example, thought that the interview used to identify trainees’ motivation to join the course needed to be revised:

*The questions that were used were not very good it would have been better if we could have created our own. Then we could have had more control over it. Also I think it would have been good to have*
team interviews like they do in the retail sector so that it was like real life as much as possible.

Other suggested changes to the selection process included:

- using a pre-course sample to find out their real views and attitude and whether they really wanted to establish a career in retail
- using personality profiling
- using Key Skills tests to identify trainees who were below level 1 and to provide them with additional support before letting them join the course
- testing them in a team situation using the kind of ‘mini assessment centre’ commonly used by retail employers.

3.3 Reasons for joining the course

The main reason trainees gave for joining the course was that they wanted to get a job in the retail sector and felt the course would help them do so (23 trainees). Ten of these trainees specifically mentioned that they wanted a career in retail. For example, one trainee explained:

*If there was just one reason for joining this course it was to get a career in retail. The leaflet attracted me because it was ambitious - I’m very interested in being a manager.*

The leaflets and advertisements for the course had emphasised how the course could lead to a career in retail and this had attracted some trainees. Some could even recall the title on the leaflet: ‘Turning Jobs into Careers’. The other reasons that trainees gave for joining the course were also related to getting a job. However, some trainees saw the skills, experience and qualifications as the immediate goal but recognised that these outcomes would ultimately help them get a job in the future.

Twenty trainees mentioned that the qualifications they were able to gain from the course were an important factor. As one trainee explained:

*The qualifications are really attractive. I think they are the most attractive thing about the course. You need the paper evidence to get a job these days… getting the NVQ and the key skills will help me get a job in the future.*
Twenty trainees mentioned that the opportunity to gain work experience had attracted them to the course. One young man reported that this was the main reason for him:

*The real reason I decided to come on this course was that it offered the experience of a work placement. That was the big attraction.*

Some of the trainees explained that they had found it difficult to get work without having any previous experience and they had wanted to get a place on the course because it offered the opportunity to gain experience in the workplace, which was something employers were looking for.

Nine trainees mentioned an interest in working with people had attracted them to the course and to a career in retail. As one trainee pointed out:

*Working with people is what I want to do. I have good inter-personal skills and am happy dealing with customers. This course sounded like it was something that could benefit me. I have always had an interest in retail, and this course offered the opportunity to combine these two interests - the retail aspect and working with people on a daily basis.*

Seven trainees mentioned the skills that they hoped they would develop whilst on the course were important. Interviewees thought that these skills were important life skills and they recognised that they would ultimately help them to get or maintain a job in the future. For example, one trainee said: ‘The skills that you get on this course aren’t just skills for industry; I think they’re skills for life’.

### 3.4 Degree of satisfaction with the college course

As part of the second round of interviews, which were conducted towards the end of the college programme, trainees were asked to rate their satisfaction of the course on a four-point scale (‘very satisfied’, ‘quite satisfied’, ‘a bit disappointed’, ‘not at all satisfied’). Of the 25 trainees interviewed at this stage, two in five stated that they were ‘very satisfied’, and the same proportion that they were ‘quite satisfied’. Several of those who very satisfied said that ‘I wouldn’t change a thing’ about the course. Others explained their positive responses related to the good relationships they had developed with the college lecturers. As one trainee explained:
I am very satisfied with the course because they always treated us like adults and I felt like the lecturers were always there for us if we had any problems and supported us.

One in five trainees said they were ‘a bit disappointed’ with the course. The main reason appeared to be interviewees’ view that the course had not been well organised, particularly at the start of the course. Trainees complained about room changes and the clustering of too much coursework towards the end of the year. In the words of one trainee:

I feel a bit disappointed with the course because I don’t think the course was very well organised. We have been given loads of work at the last minute and also the rooms that we have our lessons in keep changing so we have to find the new rooms and we get lost trying to find them. It’s just not very well organised and they need to organise it a bit more.

It is worth noting that no one said that they were ‘not at all satisfied’ with the course. This may be partly explained by the fact that those who may have been very disappointed with the course would probably have already dropped out at this stage.

3.5 Best liked aspects of the college course

Their first flavour of the workplace (via the 2-week work placement) was cited as one of the best aspects of the college course. As one trainee pointed out:

The work experience we gained during the 2-week placement was really important. It felt like we were really getting to know what retail was about.

Another trainee particularly liked the way the work placement ‘lets you put into practice what you learn at the college’.

The possibility of meeting people and making new friends both in college and during the work placement were also generally appreciated. In the words of one trainee:

Definitely, meeting with new people, both in the workplace and in the classroom at college. I think it’s the people that’s really made this course and the whole experience so good
As regards the college course itself, trainees were particularly appreciative of interactive teaching approaches involving team-work and role plays. Several trainees highlighted the customer service skills training as having been particularly enjoyable in this respect – it was also recognised and appreciated as being particularly relevant to the retail environment. Three trainees also said that practising interview techniques was particularly good as it was seen as directly relevant to finding a job.

### 3.6 Least liked aspect of the college course

When asked what the trainees liked least about the course, seven responded that they liked least having to do too much writing for their ‘assignments’ or ‘portfolios’. In the words of one interviewee:

*I didn’t like all the writing stuff and classroom stuff because it was a bit boring and reminded me too much of school.*

Several trainees also identified Key Skills as their least liked aspect. Reasons given included a general aversion to numeracy in particular or a perception that the things taught were not relevant to the workplace. As one trainee said:

*I suppose the Key Skills lessons. Yeah, they were pointless. We did some maths and communications stuff, with little class tests. There’s just no need for them. They weren’t difficult or anything, just after doing the placement, you see they don’t fit in.*

Other comments related to having to fit in with the rules established by the colleges to help trainees prepare for the workplace. Two trainees, for example, complained about having to fit in with the timetable of the college course, including comments about not liking ‘to get in for a 9:30 start’ or ‘finishing at 4.30pm’ during a college day and ‘sometimes even later’ during their work placements. One trainee also complained about the employability rules that were enforced by college lecturers which reminded him too much of school.

*The rules - not chewing, no hats - it’s like school again! They are a bit childish the way they tell us off all the time - it’s not like normal college where no-one gives you stick for chewing gum. I think that the more you tell someone to do something the less they’ll listen to you. If they’d just let it be after a while I’d take off my hat anyway.*
It is worth noting that this trainee was wearing a cap in class before the interview but took it off when he came into interview room.

In contrast, one trainee complained about the immature behaviour of some of her classmates:

Some of the trainees here get distracted very easily and are a bit immature. Some of them can spoil things and X, the tutor, has had a bit of a hard time. But she’s laid down the law to them.

The following chapter explores trainees’ and employers’ experiences of the 2-week work placement which took place three weeks into the college course.
4. Views and experiences of the 2-week work placements

This section explores trainees’ and work placement supervisors’ views of the 2-week work placement. It is based on interviews with ten respondents who had direct contact with trainees. These interviews were conducted just after the trainees completed their 2-week work placement. Additionally, interviews with 25 trainees were carried out towards the end of their college course.

4.1 Preparation for the work placement

Just over two-thirds of trainees felt well-prepared for the 2-week work placement. Several trainees said that ‘there wasn’t anything they could have done to better prepare me for the placement’. Others said they were ‘happy going into the placement’ having had a basic introduction to retailing in the first few weeks of the course.

However, eight trainees said they did not feel fully prepared. Issues identified by one or two individuals related to:

- not being given enough time to prepare for the placement
- not having been given enough information from their college of how to get to the work placement
- lack of contact with employers before the placement started; as one interviewee explained: ‘I would have liked to have met the people I was going to be working with before or a rep from the company so that I would have had a contact there’
- general nervousness about going on work placement
- feeling not sufficiently informed about the reality of working in retail; in the words of one trainee: ‘They didn’t actually tell us what it would be like standing up all day. I was so tired and my legs were hurting’.

Most trainees said that they had been on at least one employer visit and this was generally appreciated, although some complained that they had not visited their work placement employers. Others said they had been encouraged to do research about their employers on the internet or carry out informal visits
themselves. Generally, though, trainees said that they had not received very much information about their employers before starting the placement. Several said that it had been a bit too rushed and that they had only been told where they were going at the last minute.

4.2 Experience of the work placement

About half of the trainees were generally very positive about what they had done on their placement. Only three were mainly negative, describing what they had done as boring or repetitive, while the rest described their experiences in neutral terms. Positive comments included:

- feeling a sense of achievement when completing challenging activities. As one trainee reported: 'I enjoyed the till most, because everybody thought it was going to be hard and pressurised and I managed to cope with it and enjoy it. People told me I did very well'
- being given responsibility for an area of the shop or to complete particular tasks
- feeling part of the team. In the words of one interviewee: ‘We didn’t really expect much beforehand because we were only doing a 2-week work placement, but we fitted in like normal staff which was really good’.

Asked what had been the best aspects of the work experience, 17 of the 25 trainees said that it had been the people they worked with, as illustrated by the following statement:

*The best thing about the placement was the people. They were all really friendly and I got on with all of them. My supervisor was really helpful and was very kind to me. I felt welcomed and part of the team.*

The main things that trainees complained about or disliked about their work placement included:

- having to do boring or repetitive tasks (seven trainees)
- having to work such a long day (five trainees)
- having to travel a long way to placement (four trainees)
- having to work different shifts (two trainees)
- not getting on with other staff (two trainees).
Other issues identified only by individual trainees related to having to deal with difficult customers, carrying heavy things, the dress code and not liking the particular department they were based in. One trainee who was a Muslim complained about not being given a suitable area to pray in:

Yes, I did want a prayer room but the area they suggested was a bit too public, so I didn’t pray. It was in the hall part of the canteen in front of everyone. I would have liked somewhere more discrete to do my prayers.

4.3 Relevance of the college course to the work placement

It is worth noting that the 2-week work placement took place quite early on in the course and, as a result, trainees had not had time to acquire much relevant knowledge and skills for the workplace.

Despite this context, most of the trainees (22) were able to identify particular things they had learned or gained from the course which they saw as useful during their work placement. However, customer service skills were the only aspect that was mentioned by many of the trainees (16 trainees). As one trainee reported, this aspect of the course had been directly relevant to her placement:

The customer service part was very useful because it teaches you how to talk to customers and how to handle someone who is difficult or even rude.

Other aspects of the course were also seen as relevant, but each only by two or three of the trainees interviewed. These included:

- how to behave in the workplace (including body language)
- merchandising skills
- how to maintain relations with other employees/your manager – ‘how to make suggestions to managers without upsetting them’.

In addition, three trainees said that the course had made them more confident, so that they ‘knew a bit more what to do and what they were talking about in the business sense’.
Two of the trainees who had identified useful aspects also identified ways in which the course had been misleading or had taught them things that went against their own experiences in the workplace. Asked whether the course had been relevant to the work placement, one trainee replied:

*Yes and no. I’ll give you an example. We were taught for ‘Customer Service’ to address people like ‘Yes, Madam’, and ‘Yes, Sir’. But on the shop floor they told me not to speak to them like that and to use more normal conversation. In the end, I had to make a judgement on how best I thought the customer would respond, so I guess that was a skill I picked up along the way.*

Only three trainees felt that the course had not taught them anything that was useful for the work placement. As one trainee explained:

*To be honest, most of it was common sense, and not stuff they could teach us before hand. A lot of the skills needed seem to come from on-the-job training.*

### 4.4 Impact of the work placement

Asked what they had learned from doing the placement:

- nine trainees said it had improved their *customer service skills*. One trainee reported, for example, that it had given him:

  *Experience, encouragement and confidence. I feel that it has given me the confidence to know that I can talk to customers. I know now how to approach them and ask them if they need any assistance rather than just waiting for them to come to me*

- seven said it had given them an insight into the workplace. As one interviewee pointed out:

  *It showed me what a retail shop is all about. I hadn’t worked in a shop before. I also realised what hard work it all is – they’re long tiring days*

- four reported that it had given them greater confidence in their own skills and abilities

- two said it had improved their team working skills.

Several individual trainees also documented the way the work placement had given them a greater self awareness of their own strengths or limitations. One
trainee, for example, realised ‘that I do get bored quickly and that I need a variety. If I get bored I’m no good at things’. Another trainee said that the placement had led her to recognise that:

*I need to have more self-esteem. The supervisor said this to me. Also, that I need to have more confidence to come forward more often and ask more questions*

As asked specifically what they had learned about working in retail from doing their placement, trainees identified various learning outcomes, including:

- that it is hard work (nine trainees). As one trainee reported: ‘*I now know how tiring it is, standing on your feet all day and dealing with customers, but now I’m better prepared for that in the future*’

- clarification of their career choice – whether or not retail was for them (six trainees). While one trainee said that the experience had put her off working in retail, others said that it had encouraged them to pursue a career in this sector, as illustrated by the following statement: ‘*I didn’t know if retail was for me or not. But the college course and now the placement has made me feel that it is*’

- realisation of the customer focus in retail (four trainees). One trainee, for example, said that he had realised ‘*that it is all about the customers, that is definitely what I learnt the customers are the most important so you have to keep them happy*’

- insight into the variety of job roles and retail environments (three trainees). In the words of one interviewee:

  *You don’t just do one business - you can change and choose the one that suits you; there is a great variety of different retail environments and not just what people think.*

### 4.5 Work placement supervisors’ views

Awareness of what the skills4industry-retail course involved was quite low among the ten supervisors interviewed at this stage of programme. The majority of them (seven) said that they had received little or no information about the college course. Furthermore, three of the ten supervisors said they had no awareness of the aims and objectives of the programme. The majority of respondents (eight) also reported that they had not received any information on the trainees other than their names prior to the placement commencing. Two supervisors said that they had not even received their names and they and
one other respondent were not expecting the trainees when they arrived to start their placements.

All the work placement supervisors reported that they would have liked to have received more information about the trainees that were placed with them, the course syllabus, details and timing of the 6-month job placement and also information about the pay trainees were to receive for their work during the placement.

Only half of the interviewees were aware that the guidelines had been sent to them by the skills4industry-retail project manager. Those that had received them had found the guidelines useful. One supervisor, for example, said that she had found the ‘briefing pack (...) extremely useful. It came through via email. I can’t think of any shortcomings or ways that it can be improved’.

It is worth noting that a lot of information was provided to employers by the skills4industry-retail project manager and may have not been passed on internally. This may suggest a need to ensure in future that all relevant people are sent this information and not just to rely on internal communication channels within organisations.

Respondents were asked if they thought the trainees had been sufficiently prepared for the placement and knew what to expect from their placement. The majority of supervisors (eight respondents) felt that the trainees had been adequately prepared for the placement. As one respondent commented:

*Yes, they were sufficiently prepared and yes, they knew what to expect. They were inexperienced, as all work placement trainees are, but they did have some skills. They were self-motivated, they were able to use their initiative, and they were also able to communicate appropriately with more experienced members of staff when they got into difficulties.*

However, there were two work placement supervisors who felt that the trainees that were placed with their organisations had not been adequately prepared for their placement. In particular these respondents felt that the trainees needed to know more about the organisations that they had been placed with and the roles that they would be asked to take on.
All but one of the supervisors reported that they had experienced some problems with one or more of the trainees that had been placed with them. These problems included:

- unauthorised absences (seven respondents)
- other time-keeping issues (three respondents)
- relationship issues with other staff (one respondent).

In several cases, trainees had not completed the placement, often simply failing to turn up one day or walking out in the middle of the day. In some cases, employers had told trainees not to come back due to disciplinary or severe time-keeping issues. As one supervisor related:

> Two trainees we had to ‘let go’ because their time-keeping was so poor. Basically we dropped them. We did address their poor time-keeping as it happened; we gave each of them two opportunities to sort it out, literally gave them a warning, and made it very clear that it wasn’t to happen again - but it did. And so we dropped them at the end of week one.

Most of the work placement supervisors were able to identify some positive changes in most of their trainees by the end of the two weeks, including:

- increased confidence (six supervisors)
- a more professional attitude (two supervisors)
- improved communication skills (two supervisors)
- increased enthusiasm (one supervisor).
5. Trainees’ experiences of the 6-month job placement

The data for this chapter is taken from interviews which were conducted with trainees towards the end of their 6-month job placement. Fourteen trainees were interviewed in total, 12 of these trainees had completed or were near completion of the job placement and two trainees had left the programme early and had not completed the placement (for further information regarding the sample see Section 1.3).

5.1 Trainees’ experiences of the job placement

The majority of trainees had enjoyed their work placement and had found it a positive learning experience. Most of the trainees said that they were involved in a variety of tasks, the most common being: serving customers, dealing with orders and/or deliveries, working on the till and stock replenishment. The majority were happy with the work they were given. Interviewees were particularly appreciative when they were given the opportunity ‘to get experience of doing different things and of different aspects of the retail environment’. Indeed, most trainees reported that they were given ‘the opportunity to have a go at everything’.

In contrast, a few trainees reported that the work they had been given had been quite repetitive. For example, one trainee explained: ‘It is not really motivating work, it is quite repetitive and you are doing the same thing all the time’. These trainees were frustrated that they had not been given more variety and opportunity in terms of tasks.

The majority of trainees said that what they enjoyed most about the placement had been the people, usually meaning the colleagues they had worked with. They frequently commented on the way their supervisors and colleagues had been ‘really friendly’ and ‘supportive’ and that they had enjoyed working as part of team. One trainee said: ‘The people have been really helpful and really supportive’ and another commented that ‘the staff were very friendly, and I was made to feel welcome’. Several trainees also mentioned that they had
particularly enjoyed the experience of being in the larger stores. This had been both challenging and ‘exciting’ for them and most had found it a valuable learning experience.

When asked if there was anything they had not enjoyed, six trainees reported extremely positive experiences and said there was ‘nothing’ they had not enjoyed. The other eight trainees did report aspects of the job placement that they had not enjoyed, such as dealing with difficult customers, having to work variable hours and shifts, the repetitive nature of the work and having to do cleaning.

All but one of the trainees reported that they had not had any serious problems during the placement. The one trainee that reported having problems said that this was in relation to paying tax which he felt he should not have had to pay. He had discussed this issue with his employer and it appeared to have been subsequently resolved.

Most of the trainees reported that they had used the skills they had developed in college, particularly customer service skills, communication skills, teamwork and merchandising. There were four trainees who felt they had not used the skills developed in college either because they had not been given the chance or because the skills required were different from those they had been taught. As one respondent explained: ‘I learnt a lot of skills at college but I didn’t get a chance to practise a lot of it at the placement’.

Two trainees suggested that one way in which the college course could have better prepared them for the placement was to help develop their IT skills. As one trainee explained:

> It would have been good to have done more IT work...we did a bit but you do have to use computers in the workplace so it would have been good if we had done more of that.

However, all of the trainees that made suggestions also acknowledged that a lot of the necessary skills were learnt from ‘actually being there’ and that the college course could not, and should not, be expected to teach everything.
5.2 Achieving the NVQ

Eight of the 14 trainees who were interviewed reported that they had completed their NVQ during their job placement. The remaining trainees either were not sure whether they had finished it or said they definitely had not done so because they had not completed the necessary work.

The interview evidence suggests that there was some variation in the levels of support that trainees had received in relation to completing their NVQ, from both the college assessor and from supervisors and work colleagues. In most cases, the trainees had received visits from the assessor every other week. However, a number of trainees reported receiving less frequent visits (in some cases only twice during the job placement). Those trainees who had been visited less frequently also reported that they had received little or no support in relation to the NVQ from colleagues and, subsequently, they were among those trainees who had not completed it. Some of these trainees were frustrated by the lack of support and were disappointed they had not completed the NVQ.

Those that had completed the NVQ reported that they had found it difficult to manage the workload and several trainees, when asked, agreed that it would have been useful if they had returned to college for half a day each week to work on the NVQ: ‘It has been hard work, especially trying to do the paperwork while you are working’. Not all of the trainees had been given regular time off the shop floor to complete the necessary paperwork and three trainees said they would have liked additional support.

5.3 Training and support

The majority of trainees had received additional training during their job placement. In some cases, this had only consisted of an induction and/or health and safety instructions. In other cases, trainees had completed a training programme covering a variety of topics including, customer service, stock management and telephone skills. Trainees that were required to deal with orders or deliveries and/or work on the till usually reported having received training in order to do this. However, there were three trainees that reported that they had not received any additional training whilst at the placement.
Trainees were asked whether they had been allocated a mentor at the job placement and only just over half reported that they had. Most of those that had been given a mentor had found this relationship useful as they could access additional help and advice if needed. In some cases, usually in the larger stores, the mentor had been someone working in a different department to the trainee; in other cases, usually in the smaller stores, the mentor was a member of the trainee’s team. This meant that trainees had varying levels of contact with their mentor. Some of larger stores also operated a ‘buddy’ system for new employees and in these stores the trainees were paired up with a work colleague when they first started their job placement. Trainees found it useful to have someone at a similar level that they could seek help from if they were unsure about something.

In one of the larger stores where several trainees were undertaking job placements across different departments the trainees were all given the same mentor. The mentor was a qualified internal NVQ assessor and subsequently the trainees had been able to access additional support and help with their NVQ work: ‘we all met up with him in a group and individually to go through the objectives and how to collect evidence’. Trainees had found this extra support really helpful: ‘He would help with anyone who had problems or questions…he would drop everything and come and find us if we needed him’. The combination of having a mentor to help trainees with the NVQ work and a buddy within their department to answer any everyday questions appeared to be the best example of an effective support system to help the trainees to complete their placement and qualification successfully.

The majority of trainees reported that they had received enough support at the job placement. In contrast, one trainee was less positive about his job placement experience and this was found to be related to the fact that he had neither been given a mentor, nor been visited by his college tutor. As a result, he had felt quite isolated when he had encountered problems. He said that he had attempted to communicate his concerns to his employer but felt that he had not been listened to, as he explained:

*I feel like I have been neglected. I had something to say, but I wasn’t listened to. It would have been good if my tutor had of come in and she could have sorted it out, but I didn’t get any support.*
Indeed, only one of the trainees reported that they had been visited by their college tutor during the job placement. All of the remaining trainees reported that they had not received any visits from their tutor and had little or no contact with the college. The one trainee who had received visits had found them useful as it had ‘served as a bridge’. Almost all of the other trainees reported that they would have liked more contact with their college tutors. Trainees felt that visits from the college tutors would have provided additional support and more of a link between the college course and the job placement. For example, one trainee said: ‘It would have been good if one of the tutors had visited us to see how we were getting on’.

Finally, when asked how satisfied they were overall with the placement, six trainees said they were ‘very satisfied’, six said they were ‘quite satisfied’ and two said they were ‘a bit disappointed’. The main suggestions on how the placement could have been improved, included getting more support (particularly with the NVQ), having the opportunity to work in different departments a bit more, being given more variety in terms of tasks and increased pay during the placement.
6. **Employers’ views and experiences of the 6-month job placement**

6.1 **Roles and responsibilities of interview respondents**

This chapter is based on interviews with eight members of staff of employers who provided 6-month job placements. When contacting stores the NFER research team always asked to be put in contact with the person who had most contact and experience with the trainee during the placement. In most cases, we were put in contact with the trainees’ supervisor or line-manager. However, on other occasions, other people were said to be more appropriate, or the supervisor had recently left, and so we ended up speaking to someone with more of a general overview of the placement. This meant that the final sample of eight respondents included:

- five supervisors/line-managers of the trainees
- three with a general management relationship.

Even though the respondents’ relationships with the trainees differed in this respect, these respondents will, for convenience sake, be referred to as ‘supervisors’ in the remainder of this chapter.

It has to be noted that there is a potential bias in the sample towards respondents who had contact with trainees who had either been offered further work or had completed the placement successfully. The NFER research team also tried to get access to some supervisors of trainees who had dropped out of the programme at an early stage but these were either reluctant to be interviewed or could not be contacted. It has to be noted, though, that the three interviews conducted with those with a more general management responsibility provided some insight into the less successful placement experiences.

Further insights into the employers’ experiences of the job placements were provided via interviews with four senior managers as part of the key partner interviews conducted (see Section 1.3 above). These respondents had more of a strategic involvement in the programme, including representing their
companies at steering group meetings and co-ordinating the placements in their stores. These respondents will be referred to as ‘employers’ in the remainder of this chapter.

6.2 Views and experiences of the placements

Supervisors’ views of the success of the job placements varied. A small minority of trainees (about four trainees) had done really well right from the start of the placement and had managed to adapt their behaviour to the workplace setting. As one respondent reported:

In X’s case [he’s adapted] very well – he was here to learn and he was easy to talk to. I think that if you saw him, you wouldn’t be able to spot that he was any different from anyone else.

Several others (about six trainees) were said to have initially had some problems but had settled down and become more reliable and responsible over the period of the placement. In some cases, supervisors commented on the way trainees had ‘jumped over their shadow’ and really changed over the period of the placement. In one instance, for example, a supervisor said that he was not impressed with the trainee during her initial interview, and said that he would not have taken her on if his company had not already agreed to do so. He explained:

She couldn’t give answers to basic questions. She couldn’t give examples of team working, of working on her own, or of using her own initiative. She was very quiet and lacked that oomph you look for in an employee.

However, he emphasised that she had improved enormously over the six months, so much so that she was very popular with the staff, and that everyone was sad to see her go at the end.

Most of the remaining trainees were described as not having managed to fit in and had either left on their own accord or had been told to leave. All employers reported that they had experienced such problems with at least some of their trainees. Even those supervisors who had relatively positive experiences commented on attendance problems and one talked about conflict with other members of staff. An illustration of the ways in which trainees had
dropped out of the placement for different reasons was provided by one supervisor:

One student A turned up on the first day and then we never saw him again. B – she completed the NVQ very early on because she had previous experience of an NVQ because she had done one before. After that she thought she didn’t need to be here any more. It was a shame because she had got on really well. C – was very distant, he had attendance problems and couldn’t be relied upon. He made up excuses about having family problems and his line manager tried to give him opportunities to try again but his attendance wasn’t good.

An interview conducted with a course manager in one of the three colleges towards the end of the placement highlighted even more serious issues with some of those that had been told to leave their placements, including theft and credit card fraud.

### 6.3 Views of the relevance of the college course

As was found after the 2-week work placement, supervisors felt that they had not had enough contact with the colleges during the job placements. In some cases, this may have been due to the role of the respondent, with other people in the store having had more contact, but in others this was clearly not the case. Respondents commented on:

- a lack of information about the content and purpose of the course, in particular with reference to the NVQ
- not having really built up a ‘relationship’ with the college.

This resulted in supervisors not knowing what to do if problems arose that they could not deal with by themselves, as one interviewee pointed out:

* I would have liked to have had a closer working relationship with the college so that I knew (and they knew) exactly what was going on. I also thought the college could have checked on how she was doing more frequently.*

Similarly, another respondent pointed out that the only external contact they had had was with the NVQ assessor, but that this had not been sufficient from their point of view:
The NVQ assessor (...) has been in to visit [the trainee] and observe her. But it was the section manager rather than me who has had conversations with her. Other than that we have had no contact with the college. We were just told that someone was coming, but nothing more.

Asked whether this was sufficient, she replied:

No not really, I wouldn’t have known who to contact if there had been problems.

As a result of this perceived lack of contact with the college, almost all respondents commented on the way they were unclear about what trainees had done as part of their college course. One supervisor, for example, commented:

I’ve felt very much in the dark about the aims of the course and what precisely it involved.

This meant that most interviewees found it very hard to comment on the relevance of the course to what trainees did as part of their placement. Those that were willing to comment made negative comments based on the perceived lack of preparation of trainees when they started their placement. Asked how relevant the course was, one supervisor responded:

Not very useful! I didn’t think she knew any more than someone leaving college and she possibly knew a bit less.

It is worth noting that supervisors’ comments need to be seen within the context that they had very little or no understanding of what the college course covered and that they had no idea what the trainees’ starting point was. This means that the course may have had a greater impact on their skills and qualities than they were aware of.

Only one supervisor made concrete suggestions of how the course could have prepared the trainees better:

They need college training to be more ‘business focused’. They need to know about working to targets, key performance indicators (KPIs), and selling products to customers, and have a better understanding of individual business needs.
6.4 Views on the value and purpose of the NVQ

There was no agreement among supervisors on the relevance and value of trainees completing the NVQ although none completely dismissed them as irrelevant. Overall, respondents’ perceptions appeared to be influenced by their own previous experiences of the qualification, including whether or not their own organisation used them, and their personal qualification history.

The majority of respondents thought that having any qualification was of value to young people, as is illustrated by the following statement: ‘Any qualification matters – employers do look for qualifications’. Another supervisor made a similar comment pointing out that ‘it gives them a bit of confidence if they have qualifications, I think’.

Only two supervisors commented favourably on the value of this particular qualification. One respondent pointed out that she ‘would regard someone with a similar skills4industry NVQ as, to their credit, seriously wanting to work in retail’. Commenting on NVQs in general another respondent, who herself was qualified as an internal verifier, said:

I think they are fantastic because they help broaden your perspective on aspects of business and broaden their views of retail. It is two-way as well because it is a learning opportunity for the trainee and for the assessor as it helps them develop management skills.

However, other respondents emphasised that personal qualities are more important in making decisions about recruiting someone or not and that qualifications such as NVQ are not as important. In the words of one respondent:

I don’t really look for qualifications when I recruit – I base it on personality. You can show them the practical things once they are here but they need to have a natural ability to work with people and that is not something that you can teach in college. Not just anyone can work in retail, it is about team working and those things are very important here.

The following chapter explores the overall impacts and outcomes of the course.
7. Impact of the course

The data for this chapter is based on interviews with 14 trainees and eight supervisors at the end of the 6-month job placement. It presents the outcomes of the whole programme for all those involved in the programme, including trainees, employers and the three colleges.

7.1 Outcomes for trainees

Skills learnt and developed

Trainees felt that they had learnt a variety of new skills as a result of the programme. The ones most frequently mentioned were customer service skills and communication skills. Comments from trainees included:

*My customer service skills have really improved; I’m not nervous like I was before and I have learnt how to treat people and how to calm down people if there is a problem, and how to deal with difficult customers.*

All but one of the trainees felt they were better equipped for working life as they had got work experience and developed skills which would help them to gain future employment. For example, one trainee said: ‘the discipline and routine will help me in whatever I do’. Another trainee explained: ‘I know how to speak to customers and I know I can stick at it and work long hours’. The one trainee that reported feeling he was not better equipped for working life had found the placement hard work and quite a challenge. This interviewee explained that the experience had actually put him off working in retail: ‘To be honest it [the placement] has put me off. I was coming home with headaches and sore feet and I think it has put me off working in retail’.

When asked whether they had changed in any way since they started the course, the majority of trainees reported that they felt more confident and found it easier to communicate with people (both colleagues and customers). Trainees who had completed the job placement felt a sense of achievement
and this in turn had boosted their self-confidence. As one individual explained:

* I'm more confident in general, not just at work. I don’t worry about things like I used to. I know I can do things if I put my mind to it. Before the placement I had never worked and I didn’t think that I would be able to hack it, but I have stuck at it, so I have proved that to myself. *

Interviews with supervisors supported trainees’ own assessment of the impact of the placement and provided evidence of other positive impacts, including:

- acquiring relevant merchandising/technical skills
- developing team working and communication skills
- learning to manage their own time
- adapting their personal appearance to the work situation
- developing customer service skills.

An illustration of some of the ways in which trainees were said to have benefited from their experience was provided by one respondent who had had contact with several individuals during their placement. Those that had completed the placement were said to have:

* .. learnt customer service skills, how you relate to people both external and internal, communication skills, how to react to people in different ways, respect, and they have developed and matured. [One trainee] in particular had an attitude to start with but she has really developed and matured and has had the best reports. She has matured and come on in leaps and bounds. *

Another supervisor commented on the way the trainee she was in charge of had developed all the necessary skills over the period of the placement and had, as a result, been offered a full-time position:

* He is a full-time sales associate now and he has learnt everything he needs to. Team work, customer service skills, things like that; he has learnt how to manage his time and his appearance. *

**Achievement of the apprenticeship framework**

When interviewed, the majority of trainees were unsure whether or not they would achieve the full Apprenticeship framework and most were unsure what
this involved. Those trainees that had completed the NVQ were more positive and were more confident they had completed the necessary work to achieve the qualification. For example, one trainee said: ‘I have passed all the exams and I have got the NVQ and I have done my portfolio’, but still was not sure whether this was enough to get the Apprenticeship.

Almost half of the trainees said it was not important to them whether they achieved the Apprenticeship framework or not. However, the other half felt it was important and thought that the course would have been a waste of time if they did not achieve all the relevant qualifications, as one trainee pointed out: ‘because I started it I want to finish it and get the qualifications... otherwise it would have been a waste of time’.

The majority of trainees were unsure whether it was important to their employer that they achieved the qualifications. Only three trainees said they thought it was important to their employer. These trainees had all completed placements at stores where they had been given help and support to complete the NVQ.

**Trainees’ destinations**

Overall, ten of the trainees who completed the course were offered a job with their placement company, but only eight of them accepted the position offered to them.

At the time of the interviews, five trainees had been offered employment and accepted the offer. They were clearly pleased they had been taken on by their employer on a permanent basis. One respondent, for example, reported:

> I was offered a job in January which I accepted. I was really grateful, as no one else was offered a job and I was the only one they kept on.

About a week before the job placements were due to finish, three trainees had not yet been told whether they would be offered a job. All three of these were subsequently given a job after the interviews were completed with their placement employers. One other trainee who had not been given a job at the end of the placement was later offered a part-time position. She had not taken this up as she had wanted a full-time post and was continuing to look elsewhere. Interviews with job placement supervisors also revealed that one
other trainee, who was not available for interview, had been offered a job but had refused the offer for personal reasons.

Destination data collected by the three colleges for those trainees who had not completed the course reveal that ten of these trainees had gained other job opportunities in retail and other sectors. No evidence was available of whether these jobs were permanent or more temporary positions or how long trainees had remained in these jobs.

The four trainees who had completed the placement, but had not been offered a job, were clearly disappointed. For example, one trainee explained:

*I was a bit upset when they told me because I really liked working there. They said they were really pleased with me and they wanted to keep me on but they couldn’t.*

Most of these said that they were no longer sure they wanted to work in retail. Even some of those who had completed the NVQ were not necessarily considering a career in retail and reported being interested in undertaking further training in other areas, including administration, fashion or childcare. Two of the trainees reported that they were looking for part-time work. Only one of these trainees said she was still considering working in retail.

The two trainees who had left the programme early but who had achieved the NVQ were also quite unsure about their future plans. One trainee had managed to get employment in the retail sector but had subsequently left. This trainee explained her situation since leaving the placement in the following way:

*After leaving the placement I found a job doing some business admin work for a few weeks before getting a job at Argos. I packed in Argos a few weeks ago and now I’m looking to get on a course that will train me up as a youth care worker.*

Both trainees reported that they were now considering going back to college and training in a different area.

At the time of the interviews, all of those who had not been offered a job at the end of their job placement were currently not in education employment or training (NEET). Some of these trainees had completed the placement several
weeks before but they had not taken any significant steps to realise their future plans. Two trainees (who were from the same college) said that they were still in contact with their college tutor. However, none of the trainees that we interviewed reported that they had received any careers advice before or since leaving the programme.

Trainee outcomes were analysed with reference to their previous educational achievements and Talent Screener scores. As regards the latter, no links were identified between high or low scores and those trainees that had completed the placement and/or been offered a job. However, there appeared to be some link with their previous educational achievements. Thus, only one of those who had completed the full course (including the 6-month job placement) had not achieved at least some qualifications before joining the course. This suggests that those trainees who joined the course with no previous qualifications are less likely to complete the programme. There was no apparent link between trainees’ previous work experience and being offered a position at the end of their placement.

A more in-depth exploration of the impact of the programme on three trainees is provided at the end of this report in the form of case studies, which present three contrasting experiences.

### 7.2 Other outcomes of the programme

From the employers’ perspective, one of the key benefits of the 6-month job placement was presented to be the way it offered them the opportunity to test out potential recruits. As one senior manager in one of the companies providing placements pointed out:

> There has been a gain for the company because it has been a way of testing out employees. We have been able to trial them, train them in our standards so it has been good. We have been able to test them out without taking them on.

Several employers also highlighted the way the placement had been useful in developing the management skills of staff taking responsibility for supervising the trainees. As one supervisor commented:
Yes I have enjoyed dealing with them and giving them guidance. I am new to management so it has been new for me but they have done everything I have asked and I have learnt more about managing people.

The three colleges involved in the programme were also able to identify some positive outcomes of their participation, including developing links with employers and with each other. However, only two of the colleges said they were committed to being involved in delivering the course in the future.
8. Issues and implications

This chapter presents the key issues that have arisen from the evaluation and makes recommendations on what factors need to be taken into consideration for the future development of the programme.

8.1 Challenging client group

The evaluation has found that many of the young people who joined the skills4industry-retail pilot had a track record of failure and had led sporadic lives, including dropping out of education and training, short-term employment, and being excluded from school. The evidence from the research suggests that many participants have continued along a similar path – only a minority have achieved their initial goals of finding work in retail. The majority dropped out of the course – sometimes for very trivial reasons, others for more serious ones. Some left the course to do something else (including working in a different retail store), but there was evidence that at least one of them had since then dropped out of this alternative destination.

These findings confirm evidence from previous research by the NFER on projects aimed at re-engaging young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), which found that this client group tends to be very fragile, unstable, and are often unable to commit themselves to anything in the long term. These characteristics, coupled with problematic home backgrounds, means that these young people have complex and challenging needs and, not surprisingly, drop-out rates tend to be high on such programmes.

Despite these issues that were beyond the control of the course, the research evidence indicated that there were some areas in which the programme could have been improved and which may have led to lower drop-outs or more positive outcomes. Below, several key factors are suggested for ensuring (more) successful outcomes of future programmes.
8.2 Effective selection process

Tutors in all three colleges said that they were dissatisfied with the selection process used for the pilot and that they would want to use other ways of identifying the most appropriate trainees in the future. One of the problems related to the lack of sufficient numbers of trainees to choose from, which was seen as resulting from the perceived failure of the Connexions Service to refer enough potential candidates to colleges before the start of the course. College tutors also thought that starting the course in September would give them access to trainees with less severe support needs and who had not developed problematic habits from being NEET for several months.

8.3 Support in college and during placement

Evidence from college staff interviews points to the need to identify trainees’ individual requirements early on and put in place support structures that can help to overcome issues and help trainees succeed.

The evaluation also found that several trainees felt that they had not received enough support during their job placement and had had virtually no contact with their college. This meant that several trainees felt abandoned and left too much to their own devices, while employers did not feel that they could involve the college in overcoming problems. This suggests that the role of the college in providing pastoral support and advice to trainees on a regular basis is key to keeping trainees engaged. In some cases, it could have even prevented drop-out from the programme. This support could take the form of tutor visits to the workplace or trainees being released from work to come into college during their job placements. At the very least, trainees should have access to a named person in college via e-mail or a mobile telephone number.

8.4 Adapt teaching styles to trainees

Evidence from the research suggests that colleges need to adopt teaching styles that are responsive to the previous experiences of these trainees and their general dislike of too much writing and traditional class-room based approaches. Tutors also identified the need to make a clear link with the workplace so that trainees understand how what is taught will be relevant to
the workplace and are motivated to apply themselves to their studies. For this aspect to be achieved, colleges must ensure that they employ staff with the necessary skills and qualities to engage the target group.

8.5 Employer commitment to the ethos and purpose of the programme

The evidence from this evaluation suggests that not all employers involved in the programme showed the same levels of commitment to the ethos and purpose of the programme, so that trainees’ placement experiences were strongly dependent on where they were placed. Trainees’ comments, for example, suggested that they had received variable levels of employer support during their placement. Furthermore, while some respondents reported that they had been given the opportunity to experience a great variety of tasks within retail, others complained of being given monotonous, repetitive tasks with very little variety. Several supervisors’ comments also suggested that they had not put in place sufficient structure to support trainees with a history of underachievement and instead simply treated as ordinary recruits. As one trainee commented this could have placed too much of a burden on the young people:

*I get treated pretty much like a normal employee but I’m not sure if they should have treated us like normal because it has been quite a lot to deal with and we’re not used to it.*

These findings suggest the need for all employers involved in the programme to be fully aware of the aims and objectives of the programme. They also need to be committed to providing trainees with enough opportunities to see the possibilities of establishing a career in the retail sector through giving them an insight into a variety of job roles in retail, as well as allowing them to develop relevant skills.

8.6 Careers advice and guidance

None of the trainees interviewed as part of this research had received any formal careers advice and guidance during their time on the programme. Such support could have helped those trainees who had finished their 6-month job
placement but had not been offered a job with their placement company to find alternative work for other retail employers. It is worth noting that almost all of those who finished their placement but were not offered a job said that they no longer wanted to work in retail. Furthermore, there was evidence that a lot of them had simply fallen back into their old ways, hanging about, doing nothing and did not have the confidence to go out and find a similar job on the basis of the experience and qualifications they had gained. It seems that the colleges should aim to put more effective structures in place to prepare trainees for the eventuality of not being offered a job, including the provision of careers advice and guidance before the end of the placement.
Appendix 1: Trainee case studies

The following case studies provide an illustration of three distinctive experiences of the skills4industry-retail pilot from start to finish. The accounts are written from the trainees’ point of view, with comments inserted from their respective placement supervisors, where relevant.

Case study 1 presents the experience of one trainee who successfully completed the 6-month job placement and was offered a job. He had originally considered retail as a career because his brother was working in a clothes shop, and he heard about the skills4industry-retail programme through his local youth club. He was particularly interested in completing the NVQ, which he thought, coupled with the work experience, would impress future employers.

Case study 2 provides an illustration of a trainee who enjoyed her school experience but did not want to continue her education at school. While not very confident coming onto the course she became more self-aware of her own abilities having completed the 2-week work placement. Despite not being offered a job by her 6-month placement employer she had made inquiries into starting a course at the London School of Fashion. She felt the whole experience had been a positive one and said she had gained in confidence and experience and had learnt new skills.

Case study 3 explores the experiences of a trainee who was disappointed with the skills4industry-retail programme and who felt let down by both placement and college staff. He joined after seeing an advertisement for the programme in his local Connexions office, and was particularly interested in working towards the NVQ. However, at the time of interview, had not yet completed his NVQ and he did not know whether he would be offered a job.

Case study 1: ‘Manohar’

Manohar found out about the course from his local youth club: ‘One of the youth workers told me about this course. ‘I liked what the leaflet said about ‘Turning Jobs into Careers’ and wanted to find out what you needed to do to get into retail’. Before starting the course, Manohar had been studying for a GNVQ in ICT, and although he finished the course, by the end of it he had decided that IT was not for him: ‘At first I thought that was the area I wanted to work in but I didn’t really like it’.

Manohar applied for the course because he wanted to get into retail, having worked for his brother: ‘My brother works in [a high street clothes store] and...”

1 The names of the case-study trainees have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.
he got me some temping work. I wanted to get some qualifications that will help me get a job and get a bit more confident.

Manohar enjoyed the 2-week work placement, despite initially ‘dreading’ having to talk to and interact with customers and staff. He felt that returning to the same store for the 6-month job placement made things easier: ‘It was easier coming back for a second time because I already knew the staff. I was made to feel welcome’. Manohar added that one of the things he learnt was to take on greater responsibility, saying: ‘it was a bit of a shock at first, but it soon feels like you’ve been here forever’.

Manohar’s placement supervisor agreed that he had fitted in well, and was particularly impressed with his performance on the first placement: ‘Because of our experience of having him with us from the 2-week placement we knew we could expect a great deal from him’. In particular Manohar’s supervisor praised him for being ‘trusted and reliable’ and ‘capable and committed’.

Despite the importance Manohar placed on coming away from the course with a qualification of some kind, achieving the full Apprenticeship framework was not a priority: ‘I’m not bothered whether I get it or not because it’s only equivalent to about three or four GCSEs’. However, Manohar had found it useful collecting evidence for the NVQ as he felt that it ‘helps you better understand the workplace’.

The store manager was so impressed with Manohar, that he offered him a full time position early on in the 6-month job placement: ‘They offered me a job after the first four weeks and I accepted. I was really happy about it’. Despite the offer of a job at such an early stage, Manohar insisted that this had no negative effects on his college work: ‘I don’t think it affected my college work at all – I still want to get the NVQ’.

Looking back on his experiences Manohar was very happy with the progress he had made: ‘I have no regrets – the work experience and the qualifications will make a difference and will hopefully impress future employers’.

**Case study 2: ‘Amanda’**

Amanda joined the skills4industry-retail programme because she wanted to go into retail and acquire further useful qualifications. She had considered starting a course in business and retail at a neighbouring college but ‘heard about this course which sounded more interesting and so decided to go for that’. Amanda was realistic about ‘working her way up’ within the industry, and felt that this course would give her a head-start. She realised the importance of having work experience (which she lacked), having applied for several retail positions prior to starting the course but failing to be called to interview.

Despite her determination and career focus, Amanda lacked confidence coming onto the course. When interviewed at the start of the programme she said that she wanted to ‘work in fashion either as a window dresser or as an
assistant buyer…but I don’t know if I can do it’. Amanda felt nervous prior to her 2-week work placement at a large department store, particularly as it was so strange and unfamiliar to her: ‘I’d never been in it before the placement and none of my family had ever shopped there, because it was so posh’.

Amanda’s lack of confidence was noted by her work placement supervisor who made a general observation that the trainees placed with her lacked focus and direction:

*When they started they were exactly like you would expect 16-17 year olds to be. They didn’t really know what they wanted to get out of it, at the start I wasn’t sure they would be able to get here on time and work the hours but they all came on ok.*

Indeed, Amanda felt much more self-aware of her own abilities having completed the 2-week work placement, which gave her confidence going into the 6-month job placement, again with the same employer. While working in a different department Amanda found her new co-workers ‘really nice, friendly and supportive’ and enjoyed the greater variety of work experiences and increased responsibility the longer placement provided.

Towards the end of the placement it was made clear to Amanda that the employer would not be able to offer her a job ‘because the store had taken on lots of temps over Christmas and they didn’t have any vacancies’. Despite at first feeling upset at the news, she was reassured by the fact that the store had been ‘really pleased with her’ and would take her on in the future if a vacancy became available.

This turn of events motivated Amanda into pursuing her original career objective of entering the fashion industry. At the time of interview, Amanda was looking into starting a course at the London School of Fashion which she thought could help her become an Assistant Buyer within the retail sector. Reflecting on her experiences, Amanda felt that the course had ‘definitely’ made a difference to her future: ‘I’ve made new friends, learned new skills, and most importantly gained in confidence’.

**Case study 3: ‘Haroun’**

Haroun joined the skills4industry-retail programme after seeing a poster advertising the course in his local Connexions office: ‘I asked for more details over the counter. They gave me a leaflet and I rang-up to get an application form from the college’. Haroun said that he decided to join the course because it enabled him to combine two of his interests: ‘the retail aspect’ and ‘working with people on a daily basis’.

Before starting the course Haroun had been studying for a GNVQ in science because ‘my GCSEs aren’t that good’. However, he was only there for a couple of months because, as he explained, ‘I didn’t feel like I was getting anywhere so I quit and started this course instead’.
From the very beginning of the programme, Haroun was most interested in the qualifications on offer:

> You need the paper evidence to get a job these days, the experience is less important because you can just make it up. Getting the NVQ and the key skills will help me get a job in the future.

Haroun was with the same employer for both the work and job placements, but found the latter disappointing and problematic. Haroun was not given the opportunity to work in different departments, despite ‘the tutors at college telling me that I would be able to do different things’. After requesting a move to a different department, Haroun was told that he had to ‘prove himself’ and was then informed that he was having his hours cut. After exchanging stories about his experiences with his college peers, Haroun became convinced that he was ‘missing out’ and was not experiencing working in a variety of areas like others on the course.

> All I have done is the same thing all the time, putting the new stock out and helping the customers, that is all I have done. I haven’t even been on the tills. I have written a letter to the personnel department telling them that I was not happy but I haven’t heard anything.

Haroun’s work placement supervisor acknowledged that he had ‘mainly been on clothing’ but said she was very happy with his progress: ‘He has been good at following instructions and working on his own. He is charming and a good worker – no one would know he was a trainee’.

Coupled to Haroun’s disappointment with the placement was his lack of progress towards completing the NVQ: ‘I started it, but the assessor only visited me a few times and then she didn’t come again. I spoke to the college and they told me someone else would come but they never did’. His work supervisor admitted ‘I wasn’t told anything about [the NVQ]’.

At the time of interview, both Haroun and his supervisor did not know whether he would be offered a job or not, although his supervisor thought he deserved it:

> I hope he gets offered a job but it is the personnel manager’s decision to keep him on and it depends if we have the work. I hope we can keep him on. I don’t want to loose him but I’m not sure what will happen.

Haroun also felt that he deserved a job, having made the most of a problematic situation.

> If they didn’t offer it to me I would be very disappointed because I would feel like I have wasted my time. I have done seven months hard work and I haven’t achieved much. If I don’t get a job I would be back to square one: no job and no NVQ.
The case studies of ‘Manohar’, ‘Amanda’ and ‘Haroun’ identify several key challenges faced by the programme, including:

- standardising the quality of the college and placement experience
- providing advice and guidance to trainees so that they can make informed career decisions
- encouraging employers to support the trainees and carry out a structured programme of activities
- making the trainees aware of their own skill shortages and further development needs
- monitoring the trainees’ placement experiences so that interventions can be made to tackle problems at an early stage.

These case studies also illustrate some of the successes of the skills4industry-retail programme in:

- increasing trainees’ employability and work skills
- developing their knowledge and understanding of the retail industry
- raising their self-confidence
- increasing their awareness of the variety of work available in retail
- equipping trainees with the skills to be successful in the workplace.