

Who Cares About the Craft Apprentice?

A report of a study of the attitudes to further education of 2,000 Scottish craft apprentices.

A.D. Weir

Scottish Council for Research in Education, Edinburgh

The recent publication by the Scottish Council for Research in Education of "A Day Off Work?", concentrates on a description of the attitudes towards further education of some 2000 craft apprentices in Central Scotland. The data was collected during 1968 and 1969 by means of questionnaire, interview and attitude scale and in this article a brief summary will be given mainly in terms of each category of student rather than each source of data. The categories of students involved can be considered in terms of the craft course attended or the mode of attendance. Respondents were drawn from the City and Guilds Craft courses in Catering, Electrical Installation Work, Mechanical Engineering, Fabrication Engineering and Carpentry and Joinery, and over 200 of these followed full-time or block release courses during the investigation.

Since we were dealing with entrants to craft apprenticeships it is not surprising that the sample members had generally received a "junior secondary" (secondary modern) type of education, while the majority of their fathers were in manual occupations. A comparison between national figures and those for sample members on these two dimensions indicates that in 1968 34% of Scottish secondary school pupils attended junior secondary schools against 47% of sample members and that, according to the Registrar-General's classification, 65% of the population are in manual occupations against 79% of the fathers of sample members, both differences being significant beyond the 5% level. Not surprisingly, both in view of their background and in view of the lack of formal entry requirements to craft courses, few held any Scottish Certificate of Education passes, although a comparison of those who entered craft courses in 1965 and 1968 indicated a growing tendency to hold such passes. A personal interpretation of this tendency would be that (a) employers are tending to frame job advertisements in terms of 'O' Grade passes, and (b) the examinations are being attempted by school pupils lower down the ability distribution.

Many of the students had chosen their job in terms of their school experience or because of its future prospects. These two different tendencies are best illustrated by Joiners on the one hand, 70% of whom had been motivated by previous experience, and Electricians on the other, 65% of whom had been motivated by prospects. The interview evidence suggested that these jobs had been secured by personal contacts but the questionnaire evidence indicated a more important influence to be school and the Youth Employment Service. It has been observed in a number of other studies that the influence of Careers Teachers and Careers Officers is not particularly apparent to school leavers, and that often a subject teacher, particularly in the crafts, is seen to have a more direct

influence. The students' answers showed little awareness of an active training policy in their firms but, apart from the 25% who saw emigration as their main ambition, most students thought of their future as being mainly in their present job. The tendency for skilled and professional people to seek fulfilment through emigration is well-documented in the Scottish experience.

The criticisms of further education made by students fell into two main areas — the college and the course.

Their experience of the commercial provision of cafes and clubs made them a little critical of the facilities of their colleges. College played little part in the students' social and recreational life mainly because of the students' lack of interest and their other established pursuits. Only 6% of our sample had had any experience of college clubs and activities, and yet an examination of their leisure interests indicated that these young people were fairly heavily involved outside the college. There are many possible explanations for this seeming paradox, but one which struck the writer was the difficulty in involving day release craft students in college activities, especially where the college had a fair sprinkling of full-time students following diploma or degree-level courses, who were able to command the largest share of the available social and recreational amenities.

In giving their opinions on their courses, the students preferred no one form of attendance above all others, although there was a tendency for students in the later years of craft courses to indicate a support for full-time courses. This could either have been due to a case of 'distance lends enchantment.....' or to a wish to have a second chance to make up for lost opportunities. Within the course, more workshop activities was the change most frequently requested, although many students were reasonably satisfied with their present course. The question of workshop activities came up on many occasions throughout the investigation. It is certainly not the case that this was an uncritical desire to escape the classroom because respondents were not slow to point out the irrelevance of much of the practical content of their courses, nor were they slow to high-light the inadequacy of some of the workshop equipment. It seems rather to have been due to their strong opinion that they were practical men who had chosen a practical job because of a desire to work with their hands rather than their heads. They did not necessarily despise the non-practical segments of their day, and in fact Theory was the second most popular subject. What they did dislike however was a lack of activity methods or a lack of association between the subject and their work which they noticed particularly in Liberal Studies, but also in Science and Calculations.

The problem of workshop versus classroom is of particular importance at present when courses such as the 500 series are largely replacing workshop activities and practical tests with laboratory experiments and projects. From the evidence of this study it would seem that craft students are best pleased when they are actively involved in the course and least pleased when sitting inactive. How far colleges are able to and will seek to increase the opportunities for student involvement in craft courses is open to doubt. It seems certain however that the gulf between training and education has widened so that many craft apprentices are wondering about the relevance of their further education.

One final difficulty sample members mentioned when discussing their college was the travelling involved in attending college and the consequent lengthening of their day of

attendance. A policy of rationalising college courses where they can be operated in terms of efficiency in student numbers and utilisation of equipment makes some sense in technician and technologist courses but in craft courses where potential enrolments are larger and equipment costs lower, there seems less justification for centralising certain courses in one centre if thereby students have to travel twenty or thirty miles and often pass other colleges en route.

Students' general criticisms of their further education fell into four main areas. The facilities of the colleges, common rooms and refectories, were seen as unsatisfactory; the fact that for some courses the day of attendance was longer than the day of work was criticised; the relevance of some parts of the course, eg Calculations and Liberal Studies was questioned; and improvement was sought in the flow of information from college authorities to students. This last criticism is again an indication of the difficulty of communicating with day release students in general and craft apprentices in particular. Colleges, not unnaturally, have a tendency to communicate best with those who attend most frequently and those who can comprehend the communications so that once more, as with college activities, craft apprentices felt left out of the communication network.

In terms of three major ways of analysing students, by college, by mode of attendance and by course, few differences appeared between the attitudes of students in different colleges. Between different modes of attendance, the evidence generally indicated that day release attendance was more likely to be associated with poor student attitudes than was equivalent full-time attendance. The indications were that course content, being composed of both education and training, and length of day being generally no more than 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, made a favourable impression on full-time students and ought to be more widespread. There is certainly a movement towards more block release and full-time courses throughout Britain, and if it were to continue our evidence indicates that it could lead to an improvement in craft student attitudes to further education. An additional consequence from more intensive periods of study would be that the larger proportion of students involved in such attendance would be able to exert more pressure on the college authorities and make it more likely that improvements would follow in social and recreational amenities and in college communications systems.

The most important significant differences however were in terms of the craft course actually attended. This is not such a surprising finding with students, the majority of whom had four days exposure in industry to each day in college.

On a number of occasions it was observed that the status of a particular trade within the community and the ways in which school leavers found a job discriminated between the various courses investigated.

It is also apparent that the way an industry organises its training, the opportunities for promotion which exist within that industry and the student's perceptions of further education's relevance to his industry and his prospects are of importance to each course group. In Catering for example, girls seeking to enter the School Meals Service are well aware of the opportunities for speedy promotion, and in Electrical Work, boys soon learn that certification can bring considerable financial advantages. In Mechanical Engineering, on the other hand, the size of many firms and the specialisation within them can discourage young men from being ambitious and can make them look cynically at the idea of further education as a "broadening" influence.

In courses such as Catering and Electrical Installation Work where the majority of students found no conflict between college and their jobs and ambitions, more favourable attitudes prevailed. In these courses, students typically supported their college, enjoyed their courses, and appreciated the purpose behind their further education. But in other courses where conflicts were evident, less favourable attitudes were found. Joiners, for example, indicated a conflict between the hours worked on the job and the hours worked at college, Mechanicals indicated a conflict between the 'real' tasks at work and the 'unreal' tasks in college, and the Fabricators indicated a conflict between the job they had and the job they desired. The Fabricators were a good indication of an unfavourable group. The majority were in jobs they did not enjoy, jobs they had entered after many earlier changes of employment. These boys had little record of success in education and were not open to much influence from the college. Much of the evidence on this group raises the question of the need to re-examine the jobs for which four years of day release are considered necessary.

This study of attitudes to further education among craft apprentices has indicated that a number of factors influencing attitudes such as father's occupation and length of secondary education are outwith the control of technical colleges but that a number of other factors are open to influence from the further education service. Among these factors are the forms of attendance offered to each student, the facilities provided for student social and recreational activities, relationships between student and authority, the hours of attendance required of each student, the 'practical' content of each course, and the students' success in external examinations and the consequence of that success in terms of job opportunities.

Many of these factors influencing the day release craft student are intimately concerned with 'time' – expanding technologies demand more time on the course for existing subjects and additional time for new subjects; general education has to be allocated more time; shortened apprenticeships mean shortened courses in terms of years of study but conserved courses in terms of hours of study; more stringent requirements in terms of student enrolments mean more students have to travel greater distances for the most appropriate course, so that already, a number of students are faced with a twelve hour day if they wish to attend college. And in addition there is pressure on students to become more involved in college clubs and societies. With these pressures it is not surprising to note wastage and deterioration in attitudes among some craft students.

The influential factors are also intimately concerned with the function of further education. Our evidence indicates that in some occupations, further education is held in low regard, and that industry and education together will have to examine the causes, deciding either that many job entrants need less education and training than is presently offered or that there is a lack of opportunity for many job entrants to advance through taking advantage of further education. In essence, is attendance at a technical college designed to offer 'further' education or is it only designed to offer the 'associated' education required by employers or training boards or trades unions?

Turning for a time from the content of the report *A Day Off Work?* and interpretations which can be made directly from the data there are a number of more general observations which can be made about craft students in further education.

If my interpretation of the data is correct, there are two main areas where a significant intervention can be made — the college and the course.

For a number of years, further education demand grew and further education places were created without much thought to the situation of the college or the competing demands of neighbouring colleges. As a result it became common for technical colleges to be comprehensive institutions as far as level of work and range of subjects was concerned. In more recent years however, some of the larger authorities have attempted a rationalisation both by type of work and level of work, with certain colleges having either specialist departments or specialist (ie higher level) courses. An example of the first would be a College of Building and an example of the second would be a polytechnic.

With the demand for further education places levelling off, and with local government reorganisation in prospect, now is a convenient time to examine the competing claims of comprehensive/specialist colleges, especially with regard to the craft apprentice.

From the evidence available in *A Day Off Work?*, I would suggest that where rationalisation is possible it should be by level of course rather than by type of course. That is to say, congregate all craft courses in one district in one college rather than all engineering courses in one district in one college. This may seem to be tantamount to introducing selection in further education at a time when we are removing it from secondary education, but I consider that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

It has been argued that technical colleges with students following all levels and all types of job encourage a great deal of cross-fertilization between occupational groups and within occupational groups and that the social contacts within such a college promote a greater understanding between people of dissimilar social backgrounds. Those who put forward such arguments seem to me to be totally unaware of the ways in which colleges are organised and blind to the actual social groupings which students form.

Colleges generally allocate their staff and their students, strictly according to the level and type of their specialisation. Indeed the grading of courses leaves colleges with little choice but to do this. Therefore the cross-fertilization between courses is almost non-existent at the craft and technician level, and where day release is the dominant mode of attendance it is difficult to see what alternatives there are to such a pattern of organisation.

Social groupings equally tend to be formed along lines which parallel the 'type and level' structure. The formal organisation of colleges is such that the distribution of breaks, lunches, free time, often seems designed to inhibit social interaction between types and levels of student in the totally comprehensive college.

Among the factors influencing social interaction are the size of the college, the formal organisation structure, the design and layout, and the opportunities for social activities outside the college. My argument is that decisions which have been made in present colleges on these factors have tended to operate against the craft student and that we have therefore to seek alternative types of college size, structure and design. The alternatives which seem most plausible are the small college, comprehensive by type and level, where if the college is to function socially at all, craft students have to be involved, and the larger college, comprehensive by level where, since all students are not only following eg craft courses but also have a more common educational and socio-economic

background — there is a greater identity of purpose socially and academically, thereby promoting more social interaction among students and moreover among staff.

The importance one attaches to social interaction depends on how far one sees the purpose of further education in social terms and how far one sees the purpose in academic terms. From this writer's point of view, colleges where students were studying to a common level, where Student Associations were aware of the real needs of the student body, where facilities were open and popular and where students felt that supportive resources were at their call, would provide a much better background for craft apprentices than the present system does. But so long as day release remains the predominant form of attendance, the course not the college will remain the major influence on the craft student.

Among the improvements I would therefore suggest in craft courses are — making courses more 'practical'; making days of attendance shorter; and organising courses in shorter steps where students were more aware of progression. The problems associated with 'practical' and length of day of attendance have already been touched on, but the problem of alternatives to present course structure deserves considerable attention.

I can see little value in a system of craft courses geared hopefully to retaining a student for four or five years and attempting to pass on all the knowledge necessary in a job during these four or five years. There are now so many different requirements within different industries at craft level, that course structure may have to be individually tailored for each course. The important decision to be taken is on the purpose of further education; in a sense the familiar "education or training?" decision — do we seek to meet the needs of the employer or the needs of the employee? The concept of '*education permanente*' is currently under close scrutiny and such a concept seems much more suited to meeting the needs of the individual, in that the opportunity to benefit from further education is not simply available between the ages of 16 and 20, but is available to the individual throughout his life.

One could envisage that as is now becoming general, craft students would spend the first year or two of apprenticeship on 'general' courses such as course 500 or course 550. Thereafter a critical decision would have to be made for each individual as to whether he could benefit from continuing his further education at that time. After taking this decision it would be reviewed periodically by employer and employee, with an opportunity for both parties to recommend a re-commencement of studies for a variable period. In this fashion, a series of modular courses would be available in most crafts and students could drop in to any module at any time. For some students, it would be desirable to attend the modules 'end-on', but for many students there could be significant gaps between the modules. If such a system could be set up, then we would be more likely to meet the individual's needs when they arose. Such a system would also make more clear the purpose of craft studies in secondary schools. One can appreciate that in a situation where soon after leaving school a young person must take a specific craft apprenticeship or lose the opportunity almost forever, then some schools feel obliged to "prepare" young people for specific jobs. But where opportunities for craft apprenticeships are available at different times in a person's career, then schools can be much more general in their "preparation" of the 14 and 15-year-old, giving him the

opportunity to sample a wide range of skills without feeling the pressures of having to make a hasty and often unwise choice.

These suggestions are similar in nature to some of the comments in sections 103 *et seq* of the recent Government discussion document *Training for the Future*, where a Training Opportunities Scheme is outlined. Of particular relevance to this article is the comment in section 106 that training (and education) will be open to "... younger people ... who, for whatever reason failed to acquire skills immediately after the end of their education or who find that they have mistaken their first choice of career."

This proposal provides an opportunity to revise many of our systems for preparing young people for employment, especially if taken together with the comments in section 107; "There will need to be comprehensive arrangements, both for making available information about courses, and for counselling applicants."

If colleges can be involved in these proposed new arrangements, then it is not too fanciful to foresee a much better set of provisions being made for the potential craftsman. Gone would be the days of the irrevocable choice, often made on the basis of insufficient information, and in its place would be an opportunity for an introductory general craft course, with a series of additional courses available later in life where the craftsman could update his skills or trade them in for new ones.

There would be a possible additional advantage, in that, having set up a system for communicating with and counselling potential students, colleges would see in this an opportunity for providing on-going assistance to craft students, thereby remedying many of the ills which *A Day Off Work?* suggests exist.

For years the craft apprentice has been the poor relation in a further education service where glory is seen to lie in polytechnic status and CNAAC recognition. He is still however, the dominant statistic in student enrolments and the bread and butter of most staff. In view of the numbers of people involved, it is time to devote considerable resources to establishing the purposes of craft studies in further education and to end the neglect of the craft student.