

**Levack at Large**  
**Project Scotland – July 2011**

There have been many bold commitments made across all political parties in recent times on supporting apprenticeships in Scotland – none more so than the Scottish Government’s commitment to create 25,000 modern apprenticeships each year.

The construction sector and related trades have typically been the backbone of the modern apprenticeship system in Scotland. Construction is a high quality training framework that equips young people with specialised skills that are highly sought after in the labour market.

But recent trends give me some considerable cause for concern. Recent figures from Skills Development Scotland demonstrate the scale of the challenge we face. In 2010-11, the number of modern apprentices successfully completing their training across all economic sectors increased by an impressive 84% compared to 2009-10. In total, 16,968 individuals successfully completed a modern apprenticeship in Scotland over the year to April 2011. Good news, you might think. But over that same period, the number of apprentices successfully completing a modern apprenticeship in construction and related trades actually fell – albeit marginally – from 3,357 in 2009-10 to 3,295 in 2010-11.

Over that same period, there was a major expansion in the number of apprentices successfully graduating from a modern apprenticeship in the hospitality and retail sectors, contributing substantially to the overall increase in the number of modern apprentices successfully completing their training. Over the same period, the number of modern apprentices participating in the construction framework reduced by 13%, with 899 fewer construction apprentices in training at the end of March this year compared to the same time in 2010.

I certainly do not want to do the hospitality and retail industries a disservice. But I doubt the quality of training or breadth of experience provided by a modern apprenticeship in these sectors comes anywhere close to that provided by a four-year apprenticeship in the construction industry. Furthermore, even with the significant overall increase in numbers we have witnessed, we still have some way to go to meet the Scottish Government’s attention-grabbing target on the creation of modern apprenticeships.

Not all modern apprenticeship frameworks are the same. The construction sector offers one of the highest quality modern apprenticeship frameworks around. There is genuine cause for concern that in the race to ‘make up the numbers’ there will be pressure to ‘dumb down’ the more demanding apprenticeship frameworks – or to offer more opportunities in those frameworks that are the least demanding and the easiest to complete.

If we are really ambitious about producing many more high quality, highly skilled apprentices in Scotland, we must be equally ambitious about creating more apprenticeship opportunities in the construction industry.

With major growth opportunities in emerging industries such as renewable energy, the longer term outlook for our industry is very positive. However, if we don't do something right now to encourage more people into the industry, we could face a major shortage of suitably skilled construction workers as these industries begin to take off.

Creating apprenticeships shouldn't be purely a numbers game. In the race to meet the Scottish Government's targets, the high standards of quality and skills development that a modern apprenticeship in construction represents must be preserved and actively promoted.