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Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

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Evidence from: Cambrian Training





Response to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry on Apprenticeship pathways

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The written evidence provided is not confidential and can be published as evidence provided by Cambrian Training.

1.Pathways between apprenticeship levels: The extent to which there are challenges in mapping out career routes through the different apprenticeship levels, such as from a junior apprenticeship to a degree apprenticeship. Whether this is more difficult in some careers/sectors than others.

1.1 To ensure effective progression and seamless transitions within apprenticeship pathways, it is crucial to address several key challenges that impact learners advancing through higher-level programmes. Firstly, all apprenticeships must incorporate appropriate work-related job roles or activities that meet required standards. However, learners progressing to higher levels often face difficulties in securing tasks or responsibilities aligned with the apprenticeship framework or required level, leading to interruptions and breaks in pathways.

1.2 Secondly, certain standards at specific levels impose age restrictions on tasks, particularly in sectors such as Care, where individuals must be over 18 to complete certain activities and assessments. This limitation prevents younger learners from advancing within pathways, delaying their progression. Additionally, junior apprenticeships and vocational qualifications delivered in pre-16 settings frequently result in learners achieving level 2 outcomes but leave them ineligible for foundation apprenticeships due to their age and inexperience, while also lacking the depth of work experience required for direct entry into level 3 roles.

1.3 Furthermore, higher-level apprenticeships (levels 3 and above) often necessitate skills in managing people and related tasks, which are typically suited to more experienced candidates. Job descriptions should clearly outline expectations for these responsibilities; however, this prerequisite can act as a barrier to progression for less experienced apprentices. Addressing these structural and developmental challenges through clearer pathway planning, flexible programme design, and tailored support mechanisms is essential to promoting sustained learner progression and workforce readiness.



2. Economy: The extent to which apprenticeship pathways support the needs of Welsh businesses and contribute to filling skills gaps in the Welsh economy.

2.1 Cambrian Training's extensive experience highlights the success of embedding Apprenticeships within businesses across various levels, aligning job roles to national occupational standards. Employers such as Celtic Manor Collection, Bluestone, Kepak Care Home UK, Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution and Green Giraffe Organic Day Nursery are just a few employers who serve as excellent examples of how this structured approach has effectively supported workforce development.

2.2 For many SMEs, apprenticeship programmes remain a vital means of delivering training and development aligned to national standards, facilitated by quality-assured providers. However, Cambrian Training has observed that national employers operating across Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and England often find inconsistencies in apprenticeship standards confusing, with English standards perceived as better aligned to current workforce requirements. In contrast, revised qualifications in Wales are sometimes viewed as falling short of employer needs or lacking the flexibility in delivery models to support business operations effectively.

2.3 Additionally, uncertainty around future apprenticeship funding in Wales and inadequate investment in developing appropriate vocational qualifications is fostering concern among employers, discouraging them from fully adopting apprenticeships as a primary skills development strategy. This hesitancy is further exacerbating the gap between current workforce capabilities and future skills requirements. The more technical and time-intensive nature of revised apprenticeship qualifications introduced by Qualifications Wales may also pose challenges for employers, particularly at foundational levels, where shorter, more practical training models are often preferred as stepping stones for workforce development and career progression.

3. Employers: The engagement of employers in facilitating these pathways and attracting apprentices. Is specific support needed for micro, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to engage with the apprenticeship programme.

3.1 Recruiting staff within micro and SME businesses continues to be a significant challenge, whether for apprenticeship roles or other positions. However, evidence suggests that staff retention rates improve notably when employees are engaged through apprenticeship programmes, highlighting their value as a workforce development tool. Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses, particularly within the hospitality sector, are under increasing financial and operational pressures. Recent



data from Altus Group (2024) highlights that rising National Insurance contributions, increases in the minimum wage, and higher business rates are contributing to record levels of business closures across the UK. These financial burdens are directly impacting recruitment efforts, including the ability to recruit and retain apprentices. Despite these challenges, the hospitality sector remains the second-largest employer in Wales and is prioritised within all Regional Employment and Skills Plans for 2022–2025.

3.2 Apprenticeships represent a critical tool for attracting and retaining staff to support businesses through these difficult times, and the dispensation offered to employers, exempting them from National Insurance contributions, provides valuable financial relief. However, small employers often face additional challenges related to progression opportunities, particularly at higher apprenticeship levels, as their size and structure may not support the higher-level roles and salaries required by apprenticeship standards. Furthermore, SMEs frequently encounter obstacles such as limited administrative capacity, financial constraints, and a lack of awareness about the benefits and processes associated with hiring apprentices. Providing additional funding and targeted support to help SMEs promote and engage with apprenticeship programmes would be highly beneficial in overcoming these barriers and ensuring businesses can continue to develop their workforce effectively.

4. Information about apprenticeships: Good practice between careers services, schools, colleges and employers in terms of promoting apprenticeships and the provision of meaningful work experience.

4.1 Best practices for promoting apprenticeships involve directly engaging with employers to foster strategic and operational relationships while investing in the sector. Many employers have successfully embedded apprenticeships into their career pathways, making them a crucial component of their recruitment and retention strategies. Cambrian Training has adopted this approach by building strong relationships at all levels within employers' structures, enabling a deep understanding of their business needs and ensuring that apprenticeship programmes are optimised to align with their delivery models.

4.2 However, a significant gap remains in joint marketing activities between schools, employers, and training providers to effectively promote apprenticeships. This gap is often attributed to a lack of awareness among careers officers in schools and a reluctance to present apprenticeships as a viable option for all pupils, regardless of academic attainment. To address this issue, careers services should start promoting apprenticeships at an earlier stage, presenting them as a parallel pathway to further and higher education. Providing clear, accessible information about apprenticeship programmes—including career progression opportunities, pay scales, and skills development—can help dispel misconceptions and encourage greater uptake.



4.3 Furthermore, schools should collaborate with employers to offer meaningful work experience opportunities that align with students' career aspirations. Such initiatives would allow students to gain practical experience and develop industry-specific skills, thereby enhancing their employability and reinforcing the value of apprenticeships as a legitimate and rewarding career pathway.

5. Equity of support and access for learners: The extent to which apprenticeship pathways are made open to all young people in Wales and any barriers facing specific demographic groups or geographical areas.

5.1 In roles that involve shift work, non-standard hours, or are located in areas with limited public transport—such as mid-Wales—individuals often face significant challenges related to transportation and accessing employment opportunities. This issue is particularly evident in industries such as hospitality, care, and food services, where flexible or extended working hours are common.

5.2 Additionally, the lack of reliable digital connectivity in some parts of Wales further compounds these challenges, limiting access to roles that offer hybrid or home-working options. It also creates barriers to studying remotely, making it more difficult to fully utilise the blended learning models offered within apprenticeship programmes.

5.3 Cambrian Training actively works to address accessibility issues by collaborating with supported employment specialists, such as Elite and Agoriad, and through its supported shared apprenticeship programme. These initiatives aim to help disabled and disadvantaged individuals gain access to apprenticeship opportunities. However, funding for such programmes is limited and does not provide sufficient support to meet the needs of all individuals who could benefit.

5.4 Furthermore, for those with additional learning needs, there is a lack of both funding and flexibility within current programmes to deliver the necessary support, coaching, and adjustments required to ensure equitable access and successful outcomes. Without enhanced funding and tailored support structures, these barriers will continue to restrict opportunities for individuals to access apprenticeships and realise their full potential in the workforce.

6 The Welsh Government's role: How policies support apprenticeship pathways and any barriers that need addressing in that regard. The role of the Welsh Government, Regional Skills Partnerships and other stakeholders in identifying and communicating economic and skills needs to inform apprenticeship frameworks and the delivery of qualifications.



6.1 While regional skills partnerships (RSPs) have played a role in promoting skills development to employers and schools, there is limited evidence to suggest that they have significantly increased the uptake of apprenticeships or influenced the development of apprenticeship frameworks. This shortfall is further compounded by the Welsh Government's decision to reduce apprenticeship funding, which is expected to result in 6,000 fewer apprenticeships in 2024–2025. Such cuts have not only hindered efforts to promote apprenticeships but have also led to hesitancy among employers to fully engage with these programmes, further limiting workforce development opportunities.

6.2 Although the RSPs and Welsh Government research have provided clear plans to identify and address skills needs across Wales, they lack the ability to influence the broader diversification of vocational qualifications taking place across the UK. This misalignment is creating additional challenges for Awarding Bodies, which are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain or develop new qualifications tailored specifically for Wales. Consequently, a growing number of Awarding Bodies are withdrawing qualifications from Wales due to concerns over viability, exacerbating the lack of choice and flexibility for employers and learners. Addressing these funding shortfalls and qualification challenges is essential to ensuring that apprenticeships remain a viable and attractive option for skills development in Wales.