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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP12

Evidence from: Educ8 Training Group



Written Evidence Submitted by Educ8 Training Ltd to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee

Apprenticeship Pathways

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.

There are several challenges in mapping out career routes through the different apprenticeship levels, particularly in ensuring clear progression pathways for learners across various sectors. These challenges can be more pronounced in certain careers due to funding limitations, sector-specific requirements, and evolving industry needs.

Key challenges in mapping career routes through apprenticeship levels:

Differences between FE Apprenticeship Providers and ITPs

- The structure, availability, and quality of apprenticeships can vary between Further Education (FE) providers and Independent Training Providers (ITPs), creating inconsistencies in learner progression opportunities.

Lack of clear visuals and parity of offer across Providers

- Learners, schools, parents, and employers often lack a clear visual representation of progression pathways, making it difficult to understand available routes and how they compare across different providers.

Funding limitations restricting learner progression

- Some learners face restrictions in gaining experience at the same level within a new discipline due to funding rules.
Example: An apprentice who completes a Level 3 in Equine, Animal Care, or Health and Social Care (HSC) may be unable to progress to a Level 3 Management qualification, despite needing it for career advancement.

Sector-specific barriers to progression

- In some rapidly evolving sectors like IT and Digital Marketing, skill gaps between levels can be significant.
Example: Progressing from a Level 3 to a Level 4 Digital Marketing qualification may be difficult if the higher level requires proficiency in AI or other emerging technologies that were not covered at Level 3.

Restricted progression due to job role requirements

- Some sectors require learners to already be performing certain duties at the next level before they can progress, making advancement difficult.

Example: In Health and Social Care (HSC), learners at Level 3 must be carrying out specific duties that align with that level's learning requirements. If their job role does not evolve, they may be unable to progress.

Limited flexibility in competency-based roles

- Apprenticeship standards require individuals to be in a specific role to demonstrate competency. This reduces flexibility and accessibility in timely.

Example: In Childcare, apprentices may need autonomy and specific responsibilities that their current job role does not provide, preventing them from progressing.

Mismatch between academic qualifications and practical competency

- Apprenticeship levels do not always reflect a learner's ability but rather their job role. This can create barriers to progression.

Example: Someone with a degree in a sector does not automatically meet the competence requirements to work in that sector due to eligibility rules for funded provision.

Addressing the Challenges:

- **Improving visibility of Career Pathways:** Providing clear, structured career maps for apprenticeships.
- **Reviewing funding policies:** Allowing lateral movement between disciplines at the same level.
- **Bridging skill gaps:** Embedding upskilling opportunities to support transition between levels.
- **Greater flexibility in competency-based sectors:** Recognising transferable skills to ease progression.

While some sectors face more significant challenges than others, addressing these systemic barriers will improve apprenticeship pathways and create clearer career progression routes for learners.

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

Apprenticeship pathways in Wales play a crucial role in meeting the needs of Welsh businesses and addressing skills shortages. However, their effectiveness depends on how well they align with employer demands, evolving industry needs, and regional economic priorities.

How apprenticeship pathways support Welsh businesses

Employer-led approach through regional skills partnerships (RSPs)

- RSPs play a key role in enabling change by feeding employer demands into the skills system.
- They ensure apprenticeship frameworks align with the skills needs of key sectors across different regions in Wales.
- By fostering relationships between businesses and training providers, RSPs help create apprenticeship pathways that are responsive to local economic priorities.

Labour market intelligence (LMI) and employer engagement

- Regular employer surveys and LMI analysis provide valuable insights into skills shortages.
- This data informs training providers about any adaptations required in apprenticeship portfolios to ensure they remain relevant to industry needs.
- Continuous feedback mechanisms between businesses and education providers help refine apprenticeship content and delivery.

Facilitating horizontal and vertical progression

- Apprenticeships should provide both **horizontal** (sideways movement across sectors or specialisms) and **vertical** (progression to higher levels) career opportunities.
- Stronger employer-education partnerships can help learners transition more smoothly between levels and across related disciplines.
- This is particularly important for sectors requiring upskilling in new technologies or evolving skill sets, such as digital marketing, IT, and health & social care.

Apprenticeship pathways in Wales are a vital mechanism for addressing skills shortages and supporting businesses. However, their effectiveness depends on continuous employer engagement, adaptive frameworks, and stronger progression routes that reflect the realities of evolving industries.

Strengthening partnerships between regional skills partnerships, businesses, and training providers will be key to ensuring apprenticeships remain a strong driver of economic growth in Wales.

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.

Employer engagement in apprenticeships is lower than expected for several reasons, ranging from administrative barriers to a lack of awareness about the benefits. Many businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs), struggle to see apprenticeships as a viable workforce development strategy due to financial, structural, and practical challenges.

Key reasons for poor employer engagement in apprenticeships

Lack of awareness and understanding

- Some employers are unaware of the full benefits apprenticeships can offer or how they can be tailored to business needs.
- There is often a misconception that apprenticeships are only for entry-level roles rather than a workforce development tool for all levels.
- Businesses may not be aware of added value opportunities and soft-skill development that benefits an apprenticeship.
- Employers often do not value the development of literacy and numeracy through Essential Skills Qualifications and are therefore less inclined to provide further time and support for this.

Concerns about return on investment

- Employers worry about the productivity dip when an apprentice is learning on and off the job, particularly in small businesses with fewer staff.
- Some businesses fear apprentices will leave after completing their training, resulting in a loss of investment.
- The long-term benefits of training apprentices, such as talent retention and closing skills gaps, may not be immediately clear to employers.

Insufficient employer engagement with training providers

- Some employers provide insufficient support to apprentices, prevent releasing apprentices for off the job teaching and training and do not communicate sufficiently with the Training Provider. This can result in a lack of progress and learners leaving without completing the Framework.
- A lack of collaboration between training providers and businesses can result in apprenticeships that do not fully address industry skills gaps.
- Businesses may feel that apprenticeships are too rigid and not customised to their specific workforce challenges.

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

As a Provider, we work closely with a variety of services, including schools and Careers Wales to ensure young people understand the variety of options available to them during Post-16 transition. We are committed to providing high-quality, impartial information about the full range of post-16 options available. Our approach ensures learners receive tailored guidance that aligns with their aspirations and career goals.

However, we believe that the information broadly offered to young people by support agencies, schools and Welsh Government literature can be confusing and lack clarity. This can result in misleading, biased, or incomplete guidance, leaving potential learners without access to the

comprehensive range of options necessary to make informed decisions about their future.

Schools and EOTAS Learners

The quality of information provided within schools and for learners educated other than at school (EOTAS) is inconsistent. Careers Wales plays a key role, but stronger collaboration with providers like us would enhance relevance and inclusivity. Greater emphasis on integrating work-based options alongside traditional academic pathways can improve outcomes for all learners.

Providers often face challenges in engaging directly with learners due to limited time within school timetables for career-focused activities. Dedicated opportunities for post-16 providers to showcase vocational work-based learning routes would benefit learners.

The launch of the VCSE suite in September 2027 requires careful planning to ensure effective engagement and alignment with both school and learner expectations. It is essential for school staff to recognise the value of introducing vocational opportunities and the pathways they create. Schools should establish strong partnerships with Providers who can support vocational progression post-16, whether through further education, employment, or apprenticeship opportunities. Ensuring these vocational options are presented with equal status to traditional academic routes and subjects is critical for their success and uptake.

Careers Wales:

While Careers Wales (and its funded project Working Wales) is an important resource, there are gaps in tailoring advice to learners' specific contexts. Advisors may not clearly link the pathways available to your people in order to move from compulsory education and into employment. Improved coordination between Careers Wales, schools, and training providers could address these gaps, ensuring all learners receive timely and relevant information.

Sixth Forms & Colleges vs. Providers:

Challenges between sixth forms and local post-16 providers can lead to incomplete or biased guidance for learners. This is particularly evident in areas where competition for enrolment and outcomes are high. Clearer policies encouraging impartiality and collaboration between these institutions are needed.

Employers and Careers Events:

Employer engagement in schools is variable, with some providing robust opportunities while others are limited. Post-16 Providers, particularly those offering placement or apprenticeship opportunities have large databases and networks with a wide range of micro to macro employers. These developed relationships can provide highly valuable insight for learners to understand different industries and employer expectations. Expanding careers events, including virtual options, can ensure equitable employer access across Wales.

Influencers on Career Choices:

Parents/guardians, teachers, and peers significantly influence learners' decisions. However, these influencers often lack the resources or understanding of post-16 pathways to provide comprehensive support. Enhanced training and resources for parents and teachers are essential. Visual, simplified pathway options with associated benefits and 'best fit' guides would support.

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.

Ensuring equitable access to apprenticeship pathways is essential to providing opportunities for all young people in Wales. However, regional differences, provider limitations, and infrastructure challenges create barriers that disproportionately impact certain demographic groups and geographic areas.

Regional disparities in apprenticeship availability

Variability in apprenticeship provision across Wales

Some providers cannot deliver training pan-Wales, limiting opportunities for learners in rural or remote areas. This can be particularly prevalent depending on regional contract holders, available sub-contracted provision and cost of travel

Impact of priority sectors on regional access

Government funding and focus on priority sectors may disadvantage learners who wish to pursue careers outside of these industries.

Regional economic differences mean that certain sectors are more viable in some areas than others, leading to unequal opportunities.

There is a need for flexibility in apprenticeship priorities to reflect regional, local, and rural economic needs.

Barriers facing specific demographic groups

Learners from low-income households

- Financial barriers, including travel costs, disproportionately affect learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The current system of reimbursing travel expenses rather than providing upfront support makes it difficult for some learners to afford commuting to apprenticeship placements.

Rural and remote learners

- Learners in rural areas face additional challenges due to fewer local apprenticeship opportunities and longer travel distances.
- The lack of reliable transport options can make participation in apprenticeships impractical without additional support.

Technology and infrastructure barriers

- Limited IT infrastructure and poor internet connectivity in some areas restrict learners' ability to access online learning and resources.
- Digital poverty remains an issue, with some learners lacking the necessary devices or internet access to fully engage in apprenticeship training.

The Welsh Government's role: How policies support apprenticeship pathways and 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.

The Welsh Government plays a central role in shaping apprenticeship pathways through policies, funding mechanisms, and collaboration with key stakeholders such as Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs), training providers, employers, and industry bodies. While government policies have helped strengthen apprenticeships in Wales, there are still barriers that need to be addressed to ensure they remain accessible, relevant, and responsive to economic and workforce demands.

How Welsh Government policies support apprenticeship pathways

Strategic funding and prioritisation of key sectors

- The Welsh Government remains committed to prioritising apprenticeships but must ensure sustained funding to match supply with demand. Investment in apprenticeships across priority sectors is essential to aligning workforce development with economic and skills needs, supporting industry growth and future talent pipelines.
- Apprenticeship incentives for employers, particularly SMEs, encourage engagement and investment in skills development.

Collaboration with regional skills partnerships (RSPs)

- RSPs act as a bridge between businesses and training providers, feeding employer demands into the skills system to ensure apprenticeships align with regional labour market needs.
- Regular labour market intelligence (LMI) reporting helps inform decisions on apprenticeship frameworks and qualification delivery.

Commitment to inclusivity and accessibility

- The Welsh Government has taken steps to widen participation by offering financial support for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Policies such as bilingual learning opportunities and incorporating the Welsh language into apprenticeships support cultural and linguistic inclusivity.

Barriers that need addressing

Rigid funding restrictions limiting learner progression

Current funding rules prevent some learners from progressing within apprenticeships due to restrictions on gaining experience at the same level in a different field.

Example: A learner who has completed a level 3 in health & social care may be unable to access a level 3 management apprenticeship, even if it is needed for career advancement.

Regional disparities in apprenticeship availability

- Apprenticeship provision varies across regions due to differences in provider capacity and funding allocations.
- Some areas, particularly rural regions, lack access to apprenticeship opportunities, creating geographical inequalities.

Employer engagement remains inconsistent

- Despite Welsh Government initiatives, many employers—especially SMEs—struggle to engage with apprenticeships due to their understanding of value, funding rules and uncertainty about return on investment.
- Stronger employer incentives and simpler processes are needed to encourage participation.

Lack of infrastructure to support digital and remote learning

- Poor internet connectivity and limited access to digital tools in some areas restrict the ability of learners to engage fully in hybrid or online

apprenticeship models.

- Investment in community learning hubs with reliable digital infrastructure could help bridge this gap.