

Senedd Cymru

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig

Ymchwiliad: Llwybrau prentisiaeth

Cyf: AP14

Ymateb gan: Dr Brendan Coulson, Prifysgol Nottingham Trent

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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP14

Evidence from: Dr Brendan Coulson, Nottingham Trent University



Apprenticeship pathways

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee - Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

February 2025

Written Evidence submitted by Brendan Coulson, Nottingham Trent University

1. Executive Summary

To address the challenges and opportunities within the apprenticeship and vocational training landscape in Wales, a targeted and inclusive approach is essential. The submission provides evidence to create a more equitable, accessible, and localised system that supports small and medium enterprises (SMEs), prioritises local and regional need. It also ensures that young people—particularly those without qualifications—are given the tools and opportunities to succeed. Fostering collaboration, addressing geographical and social barriers, and tailoring programmes to meet diverse needs, these recommendations seek to build a stronger foundation for apprenticeships and vocational training across communities.

2. About the Author

Dr Brendan Coulson is Head of Technical Education at Nottingham Trent University. Previously he has held senior management positions at two Further Education colleges, culminating in being a Director for Learning, Marketing and Business Engagement before joining NTU in 2019. He has also served as a staff governor for a large Further Education provider in Nottingham.

During his time in Further Education, he was nominated for two national teaching awards and won the JISC Award for the use of technology to support learning. His achievements in Further Education received national recognition, consequentially, he spoke at the Houses of Parliament on two separate occasions, one to discuss how he successfully developed the first Key Stage 4 programme that pre16 home schooled learners could access in a Further Education college in England; and for his work with Boots Plc in developing a successful training partnership.

[Nottingham Civic Exchange](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/nce) is Nottingham Trent University's pioneering civic think tank with a primary focus on issues relating to the city and the region. Nottingham Civic Exchange enables discovery by creating a space where co-produced approaches are developed to tackle entrenched social issues. Nottingham Civic Exchange supports the role of NTU as an anchor institution in the city and the region. Nottingham Trent University holds engagement with communities, public institutions, civic life, business and residents at the core of its mission. www.ntu.ac.uk/nce

3. Evidence

3.1 Pathways between apprenticeship levels

The primary concern lies in the development of occupational standards predominantly by a restricted cohort of employers, often comprising large corporations. Consequently, the resulting career pathways are more closely aligned with the needs and structures of such organisations. The exclusion of SMEs from these discussions is particularly significant, as despite collectively employing a larger workforce than large corporations, their specific career pathways within occupational standards have not been adequately addressed.

3.2 Economy

The issue arises from the fact that, like all nations, the Welsh economy is composed of regional economies. It is at this level of devolution that an apprenticeship pathway can be most effectively understood and tailored. The current approach, however, imposes a nationwide framework based on assumptions drawn from groups of employers who may not necessarily be local to the regions where the apprenticeship pathway is intended to operate.

3.3 Employers

Yes, the principal challenge is ensuring the provision of financial support to enable representatives from micro and SMEs to allocate time away from their work to contribute to the development of these pathways.

3.4 Information about apprenticeships

This remains highly inconsistent. While initiatives such as the Gatsby Benchmarks have sought to address these issues, the absence of a centralised, employer- and provider-informed resource for information, advice, and guidance—one that these services can consistently rely upon—means that inconsistencies are likely to persist.

3.5 Equity of support and access for learners

While the apprenticeship wage is a positive initiative, the geographical distribution of apprenticeship opportunities presents challenges. To address this, it would be beneficial for the state to cover public transport costs for apprentices, enabling them to commute to work while retaining their salary for future savings and current responsibilities. Moreover, increased engagement with local micro and SMEs could facilitate the creation of more localised apprenticeship opportunities. These businesses should be provided with more substantial financial support to offset the costs of employing apprentices, beyond what is currently available. Additionally, the requirements for English and Mathematics within apprenticeships warrant reconsideration. Rather than treating these skills as supplementary awards, they could be integrated into the apprenticeship framework through industry-specific literacy and numeracy KSBs. This approach would help apprentices and employers recognise the value of these essential skills, while also addressing attainment gaps, particularly for individuals who face barriers to high achievement due to their social or economic backgrounds.

3.6 The Welsh Government's role

Empower the four regional skills partnerships to take the lead in directing and allocating funding based on the specific needs of their local communities and employers, ensuring alignment with government policies to support this approach. In the context of higher and degree-level apprenticeships, policy should prioritise individuals without existing degree-level qualifications. For those who already hold such qualifications, a higher employer contribution should be required. The overarching goal is to provide disadvantaged individuals and younger people with greater opportunities to acquire higher-level skills and access employment prospects, rather than primarily focusing on upskilling individuals who are already in well-remunerated positions.

4. Recommendation

4.1. *Inclusion of SMEs in occupational standards:* The needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) should be integrated into occupational standards, given that SMEs collectively employ more people than large corporations.

- 4.2. *Local and Regional Focus for apprenticeships:* The apprenticeship framework should prioritise local and regional needs over national requirements to ensure relevance, adaptability and sustainability.
- 4.3. *Enhanced advice and guidance services:* Strengthened advice and guidance services are essential to promote current initiatives and ensure robust support for future programmes.
- 4.4. *Addressing geographical access gaps:* Apprenticeship opportunities should be geographically accessible. Encouraging SMEs to offer apprenticeships can create local opportunities and improve access for individuals in underserved areas.
- 4.5. *Integrating English and Math into apprenticeships:* Incorporating English and Math requirements into apprenticeships can help bridge the attainment gap caused by social and economic disparities, ensuring equitable access to vocational training.
- 4.6. *Empowering Regional Partnerships with supporting policies:* Regional partnerships are critical and must be meaningful. Government policies should enable local authorities to take the lead in identifying community needs and allocating funds accordingly.
- 4.7. *Differentiated schemes based on youth needs:* The primary focus of apprenticeship programmes should remain on young people without qualifications. The emphasis should be on creating different schemes. To avoid competition for the same opportunities, separate schemes should be developed to cater to the distinct needs of those with qualifications and those without, ensuring equitable access and support for all.

Dr Coulson can make himself available to the committee, clerks or AMs if required to support this inquiry.