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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP23

Evidence from: CITB Wales (Construction Industry Training Board)



Apprenticeship Pathways

Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee

Construction Industry Training Board

1. Introduction

- 1.1 There are three main ways through which new workers enter the construction industry. Many undertake an apprenticeship blending learning with practical experience in industry, attend full-time college or university courses or via an informal route e.g. someone may already know someone working in industry. Whilst we know the latter represents how almost half of new entrants begin working in industry, apprenticeships with their focus on work-based learning and collaboration with employers offer an invaluable opportunity for learners to become site-ready and begin their journeys on a sustained career pathway within construction

2. Pathways between apprenticeship levels

- 2.1 The following section outlines some of the key challenges which cause breaks/represent barriers in construction apprenticeship pathways:

Apprenticeship length

- 2.2 The length of time taken to complete a construction apprenticeship is causing a real challenge in practice, impacting both the rate and speed through which apprentices can become fully active and effective members of the construction workforce and increasing the risk of learners failing to complete their apprenticeship. This could be mitigated by encouraging progression from Foundation and Progression qualifications with Prior Learning Credited and/or removing the need for attainment of the Foundation or Foundation Core from apprenticeships (a solution we are actively engaging Medr on at present) and lastly by upselling full-time learners into apprenticeships (a solution which would fall under Medr's remit to implement).

Range of work

- 2.3 Given the volume of SMEs who make-up the construction industry a considerable challenge can be for employers to have the range of work available that apprentices will need to undertake to evidence they have learnt the correct competencies and behaviours. This could be mitigated by mapping the competence attained against the level, meaning that in practice learners could still gain the same qualification albeit with a different level of competence recorded and awarded – the ability to allow this would sit with Qualifications Wales. In addition, for activity which is difficult to

evidence CITB is offering providers for the higher (level 3) skills, this would need to be instigated by work-based learning/FE providers.

- 2.4 This activity would contribute towards an overall alignment of the understanding around competency, represented through Competency Frameworks. These frameworks are up to date frameworks clearly outlining the skills, knowledge, behaviours and experience to confirm competency eventually across all Construction Occupations. They are in-line with the requirements for the Building Safety Act and other key construction legislation. They have been developed in consultation with Welsh employers and those in England and Scotland equally to provide a consistent definition of competence for the trades.

Progression (destination) data

- 2.5 There is a relatively incomplete picture when it comes to the understanding around the effectiveness of construction apprenticeship pathways at progressing individuals into sustained employment within industry. The emphasis is often on apprenticeship starts, which offer a valuable picture around attraction of courses, but as a measure alone fails to help understand the effectiveness of courses in gaining learners successful, sustained employment. Recommendation 4 of the “Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales” noted that:
- 2.6 *The Welsh Government should expedite work identifying not only enrolment trends of learners, but destinations of learners, to understand if learners progress into an industry related to their vocational qualification. These trends should be mapped against the labour market demands articulated in recommendation 3 above, to determine whether Wales is succeeding in filling its occupation and skills gaps to meet future aspirations.*
- 2.7 This function would now sit with Medr to undertake and in our view, should be seen as a priority.

3. Economy

- 3.1 The extent to which a skills shortfall exists to meet the needs of the Welsh economy is in part driven by where demand appears in the market. For example, if we consider the Welsh Government’s aim to build 20,000 low-carbon affordable homes, the ability to attract employers and their workers to this specific activity (given that the majority of employers will have a mixed portfolio of work) will be reliant on a strong, long-term pipeline of work, backed by funding. In that sense, whilst addressing the shortfall could involve increasing productivity or attracting more people, this alone will not address priorities in the economy.
- 3.2 Apprenticeship pathways could be better informed by data and information about skills shortages and the forecasted trends in construction activity over the coming years. For example, one of the recommendations made through the “Review of

Vocational Qualifications in Wales” was for the Welsh Government to undertake work to define the future demand nationally for occupational and skills needs in Wales. In turn, this would inform curriculum development, alongside clearly articulated regional and local needs framed by Regional Skills Partnerships.

- 3.3 Apprenticeship pathways with their current output of new workers into industry will not come near to satisfying the demand for construction skills within the Welsh economy. Construction apprenticeship starts in Wales picked up strongly after Covid-19 lockdown, ending the 2021/22 academic year 22% up on 2020/21, however, they dropped in 2022/23 by 18%. While final data for the 2023/24 academic year isn't yet available, interim data from Q3 shows 2,165 construction apprenticeship starts in Wales, slightly above the same figure for Q3 2022/23 (2,075). There will be pressure on occupations such bricklayers and masons (9.9%), architects (9.8%), roofers (8.0%) and labourers (4.0%) where demand is high compared to their workforce level.
- 3.4 Additional support is required to encourage providers to change their traditional operating model which concentrates on very few traditional trades. This may in the short term require support for small groups of learners until the model establishes itself e.g. timber frame, dry lining, roofing, groundworks, wall and floor tiling, steel fixing etc. In turn this would allow for additional models outside of the apprenticeship route to be developed.

4. Employers

- 4.1 The construction industry in Wales has 8,230 employers, which is 14% of all employers in the nation. Construction employers vary in size, but the vast majority are SMEs. Employer demand and engagement for apprentices is vital to evidencing the need to training providers to prioritise construction courses. Employer's often view apprenticeships as a way to nurture talent within their own company and succession plan for the future and to help future-proof their workforce. But this demand is reliant on employers having the certainty needed to expand their workforce and invest in apprentices in this way. This can be reliant on several factors, including:
- The long-term visibility of the pipeline of work and associated funding
 - The availability and accessibility of training provision
 - The perceived strength and certainty of activity in other sectors
 - Clarity on standards and regulations
 - Other related barriers which could impact or complicate construction activity (e.g planning delays)

5. Information about apprenticeships

- 5.1 The construction industry has a huge range of roles and associated career opportunities. Whilst there is plenty of easy to digest information about careers in construction through resources such as GoConstruct, at a local level, the extent to which the opportunities a career in construction can provide will often be reliant on the knowledge of individual teachers/career advisers, which in turn can create considerable variation between localities in how construction careers are perceived and promoted. Additionally, FE providers can, due to their resources at a local level, have difficulty engaging employers (who are themselves busy) to maximise the engagement between industry and learners at a point where there may be significant opportunities to build relationships that could lead to sustained employment.
- 5.2 One initiative which continues to be well-utilised is the Go Construct STEM Ambassadors - CITB has partnered with the STEM Ambassador programme, creating an industry specific scheme to inspire the next generation of construction workers. Ambassadors often provide the first introduction to the construction industry, delivering a life-changing impact on future career decisions. They engage with young people across the UK, from schools and workplaces to careers fairs and events, sharing the fantastic opportunities available in the industry.

6. Equity of support and access for learners

- 6.1 Ensuring that the opportunities are completely open to people from a range of backgrounds and abilities is vital to the ongoing effort to broaden the pool of talent available for the construction industry to draw from. In terms of apprenticeship provision Additional Learning Needs (ALN) are considered with regard to Essential Skills Level and entry requirements where the appropriate identification and assessment of ALN has taken place.
- 6.2 At CITB we support a range of initiatives aimed at addressing and helping people overcome the barriers they may face in considering and accessing sustainable employment within the construction industry. These include:
- *Fairness, Inclusion and Respect (FIR) Programme* - an industry-wide initiative that aims to make workplaces better for everyone. The programme provides free, industry-endorsed training and resources, guidance and materials, that supports businesses to be more innovative and profitable by addressing workplace culture challenges and helps attract and retain people from the full pool of talent.
 - *Industry Insight Days* – Each year CITB supports activity for National Apprenticeship Week, International Women's Day and Open Doors (an initiative that provides an opportunity for people to see an active construction site) and SkillBuild competitions at both a regional and national level. These provide invaluable opportunities to showcase the wide variety of people who work in the industry and the breadth of career on offer to prospective new entrants and career changers.

7. The Welsh Government's role

- 7.1 We see the following areas as opportunities to better understand and address barriers that would improve the effectiveness of apprenticeship pathways which fall under the government's control:

Funding Limits

- 7.2 The funding limits placed on the number of places available on construction courses can result in some learners not commencing or delaying their start (during which time they may find employment elsewhere). This could be addressed by ring-fencing the number of apprentices for construction in-line with the available evidence on the current and future needs within the Welsh economy and the trades where the greatest shortfall currently exists.

Shared apprenticeship provision

- 7.3 The shared apprenticeship model was tested within the construction industry and underpinned by Welsh Government funding, but with the funding now utilised and spread across a range of other sectors these schemes have faced a significant shortfall, risking the viability and effectiveness of the model going forward. We would encourage the committee to consider how the role of this model can be strengthened in its use, especially given its suitability in working across a range of smaller employers.
- 7.4 The approach allows apprentices to complete a full apprenticeship program by working with several employers, to gain the skill sets they require to become qualified. The Scheme allows employers to take on an apprentice, for as short a duration as three months, with no commitment to the apprentice at the end. The Scheme allows employers to enjoy all the benefits of an apprentice, without any long-term risk or long-term cost to their business. Once the apprentice has finished working with an employer they are found another placement, and upon framework completion, they will be assisted in sourcing permanent employment within their chosen trade. The model has proven to be particularly successful in retaining apprentices in industry with Cyfle Building Skills (a shared apprenticeship scheme in West Wales) seeing 90% of apprentices who complete their three years having secured employment in their chosen trade.

Tutors and assessors

- 7.5 The significant shortage of tutors and assessors means that in practice the FE sector is increasingly challenged to have the staff in place to teach courses and assess the ability of learners. The drain of these expert staff away from the education sector is in part explained by the demand for those skills workers within industry itself, where associated wages are a stronger draw. This is an area where the Welsh Government may want to consider support/incentives which could mitigate this loss and attract additional staff back to education in priority subjects/trades.