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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP26

Evidence from: Skills Academy Wales



Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee: Apprenticeship Pathways Consultation

Question 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.

Response: Mapping out career routes through different apprenticeship levels in Wales does come with some challenges, primarily related to the varying needs of individuals and employers. Apprenticeship provision at various levels, offers individuals access to appropriate training at distinct stages of their career. This allows apprentices to progress at a level suited to their experience and career aspirations. Each level provides a clear pathway for career development. Starting with a foundation apprenticeship and moving up to higher or degree apprenticeships, allows individuals to gain the qualifications and experience needed to take on more complex roles or managerial positions. It provides individuals with opportunities to move from entry-level jobs to higher level professions, offering clearly structured career progression.

Different sectors require varying levels of expertise. Some industries need workers with basic technical skills, while others require highly specialised professionals with advanced knowledge. For example, engineering, has a clear progression route from Foundation Level to Degree level. However, not all sectors have opportunities for individuals to progress up to Degree level. Whilst it is important to have clear visible levels to support progression and career development, advancing to a higher level relies on the job role and the level of responsibilities being undertaken by the apprentice and their ability to take on the demands of higher-level learning. To progress to a higher level, apprentices need to be able to demonstrate occupational competence and fitness to practice at that level. If apprentices are not 'doing the job' and meeting the appropriate criteria and standard, they will not complete their apprenticeship programme at that level. Progression opportunities also need to align to the needs of the business in which the apprentice is employed. Apprenticeships can provide a non-linear approach which means individuals can navigate their progression route to meet their career aspirations and that of their employer. For example, an employer may require their apprentice to navigate sideways to retrain on a new emerging technology or product and require them to undertake a micro-credential qualification which supports the growth of their business at that time. It can also be the case that some SMEs are unable to support progression opportunities due to the lack of career pathways available within their organisation. Not all sectors have a straightforward progression pathway, for example, some sectors, reliant on lower skilled roles, so an upskilling or retraining programme could better support the long-term career progression of some individuals. Having multiple levels ensures that apprenticeships align with the demands of various industries, allowing businesses to find skilled workers at every level.

As apprentices progress through the levels, their earning potential can increase. A higher-level apprenticeship can lead to higher-paying jobs, as it equips individuals with the skills and knowledge needed for more senior or specialised role.

The variety of apprenticeship levels allows individuals to gain relevant experience and qualifications at each stage, making them more attractive to employers. It also ensures that apprentices are provided with an effective exit point that recognises their achievement and allows individuals to progress to a higher level of learning when the time is right for them. People enter apprenticeships from diverse backgrounds, qualifications, and career goals. Offering various levels within the apprenticeship programme accommodates these differences, allowing individuals access to good quality training at the start of their career and those looking to enhance and further develop their competence and knowledge.

It is accepted that apprenticeships at different levels provide clear pathways for learning and career development, helping individuals and businesses meet specific goals and ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the right skills. However, different apprenticeship strand names can become unclear when promoting the 'Apprenticeship Brand'. For example, when promoting Foundation Apprenticeships an individual is told they can progress to an 'Apprenticeship' this can be confusing for many.

Junior Apprenticeships are available in some local authority areas across Wales. This alternative curriculum programme is providing those young people with positive opportunities to remain in education and is providing them with the prospect of a positive progression on leaving school. For many years, the apprenticeship brand continues to have challenges in receiving the same recognition as an academic pathway. Does an alternative curriculum programme, whilst working positively with young people who may be experiencing multiple barriers, help raise the kudos of the apprenticeship brand with potential learners, parents and school career advisors. Should this programme be renamed to reflect the true nature of who and what this programme is supporting?

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

Response: Apprenticeship pathways play a significant role in supporting the needs of Welsh businesses and addressing skills gaps in the Welsh economy. However, their effectiveness is shaped by the alignment of apprenticeship programmes with business demands, funding availability, and broader economic factors. Apprenticeships are designed to equip learners with industry-specific skills that meet the immediate and future needs of Welsh businesses. Employers can shape apprenticeships by collaborating with Apprenticeship Providers and their representative bodies, ensuring that learners acquire the skills necessary for their roles. Apprenticeships address chronic shortages in key sectors, for example, healthcare, dental nursing, construction, engineering, and digital skills. Welsh Government set targets for Apprenticeship Providers to ensure that the work-based learning funding reaches these high-priority sectors encouraging businesses to take on apprentices where the need is greatest.

Micro businesses and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), make up a substantial portion of the Welsh economy. Apprenticeship pathways provide affordable workforce solutions for these businesses, enabling them to recruit and train employees without

bearing excessive costs. Apprenticeships also offer tailored upskilling for existing staff, improving business productivity. Apprenticeships promote local employment and skill development, particularly in areas with high unemployment or economic deprivation. Higher Apprenticeships address the growing demand for highly skilled workers across many sectors ensuring that businesses can remain competitive in rapidly evolving industries. Apprenticeships allow businesses to develop a pipeline of skilled workers, reducing recruitment costs and improving employee retention. Employer incentives can further reduce the financial burden on SME employers. Apprenticeship Providers are in a unique position as their well-established links with employers provide on-the-ground intelligence of what works well and what doesn't. Providers can function as a voice of SMEs when important decisions are undertaken on changes to the Welsh Apprenticeship Programme. Providers also collaborate closely with employer representative groups and the Regional Learning Skills Partnerships increasing their awareness of labour market trends that help to inform the development of new Apprenticeship Frameworks and/or qualifications. Commissioned Contract Holders in Wales have key performance measures set by Medr that target priority sectors and key areas for skills development as well as focusing on increasing diversity and inclusion in apprenticeships.

Whilst there are many examples of where apprentices support the needs of Welsh businesses, there are challenges that need to be addressed to ensure Apprenticeships are responsive and flexible and remain current to meet the varying needs of employers. Keeping pace with the identification of skills gaps and rapid changes in the labour market, for example, digital transformation, green economy, makes it difficult for Apprenticeship Frameworks to be current and valid and keep pace with evolving skills requirements. The development of new Apprenticeship Frameworks can take far too long to secure the appropriate approval, and this delay can be frustrating for the employer and Provider. The lack of flexibility within the Frameworks can limit their responsiveness to meet the needs of evolving businesses and, in many cases, do not contain the appropriate accredited activity that supports an apprentices' 'fitness to practice'. Moving forward, Frameworks should contain all the qualifications and any potential micro-credentials that support an apprentice's fitness to practice within their respective sector and level. An apprentice should not need to "top up" with industry required courses to enable them to conduct their role effectively on completion of the apprenticeship. Not all employer needs will ever be the same. Future frameworks could contain multiple options that allow Apprenticeship Providers to choose from a menu of qualifications and/or micro credentials. This will provide flexibility and enable Providers to adapt the apprenticeship to suit the individual needs of the employer and apprentice.

The funding of Apprenticeships has been too variable over the past few years which has not afforded Apprenticeship Providers the opportunity to proactively plan their provision from one year to the next. The loss of European financial assistance has had a negative impact on the availability of funding to support the increasing demand for apprenticeships. This is likely to worsen with the flat line budget proposed for 2025/2026. Providers are welcoming the recent decision by Welsh Government/Medr to put in place a regular two-year contract. This will support Providers to plan provision more effectively and provide some stability to the Apprenticeship Programme.

Apprenticeship pathways in Wales are a critical tool for addressing skills gaps and meeting the needs of businesses. They provide a solid foundation for workforce development. There needs to be continued investment, collaboration, and policy support, so that apprenticeships can play an even greater role in driving economic growth and ensuring Welsh businesses thrive.

QUESTION 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.

Response: Micro-businesses, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) play such a huge part in supporting the economy of Wales. Some employers face unique challenges when it comes to participating in apprenticeship programmes, such as limited resources, administrative capacity, and knowledge about available opportunities. Tailored support can help address these barriers and unlock the full potential of apprenticeships for SMEs. Some micro-businesses and SMEs often operate on tight budgets, making it challenging to fund apprentice wages or the time needed for supervision and mentoring. They may perceive apprenticeships as too costly, even when financial subsidies are available. Smaller businesses may struggle to release experienced staff to mentor apprentices without affecting day-to-day operations. For micro-businesses, the loss of even one team member to training or supervision responsibilities can have a significant impact. Navigating the apprenticeship system, understanding funding eligibility, and managing the required paperwork can be overwhelming for SMEs without dedicated HR or administrative staff. Many SMEs are unaware of the full range of apprenticeship programmes available or how apprenticeships can benefit their business. SMEs in rural areas may find it harder to access local training providers or apprenticeship programmes that align with their needs. As mentioned previously, where an SME engages with an Apprenticeship Provider, they are well-supported and can navigate more easily through the process. However, there are many other SMEs that could benefit from a far simpler more easily accessible. Whilst an existing Welsh Government site contains information for an employer, it does takes time to navigate around the site and focuses on the employer posting and managing an apprenticeship vacancy. Employer information also appears to be integrated with information more suited to individuals looking for an apprenticeship which can lead to confusion. An Employer Toolkit, on the Welsh Government site, is out of date and is directing employers to organisations that no longer have contracts in Wales to deliver the apprenticeship programme. A new dedicated online Apprenticeship Information Hub could be developed which contains more detailed information on the apprenticeship provision, outlines the different pathways available and highlights Case Studies that promote success stories.

Business Wales provide SMEs with specialist advice and guidance which is fully-funded to support people in Wales that are starting, running, and growing businesses. Business Wales Helpline is open 10am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Could this facility be more widely marketed to micro businesses and SMEs? Extending opening times a few days a week early morning/late evening would provide greater flexibility for SMEs who tend to engage in business support activities outside of normal working hours.

SMEs and micro-businesses in Wales are critical to the success of the apprenticeship programme, but they face unique barriers that require specific and targeted support. By addressing financial constraints, simplifying processes, and tailoring programmes to meet business needs, the Welsh Government and Apprenticeship Providers can ensure that SMEs are able to fully engage with apprenticeships. This will not only support individual businesses but also contribute to closing skills gaps and driving economic growth across Wales.

Question 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.

Response: The promotion of apprenticeships and meaningful work experience in Wales depend on effective collaboration between many stakeholders, including careers service, schools, apprenticeship providers and employers. While there are examples of good practice in these areas, challenges remain in ensuring consistency and accessibility across the Wales.

Careers Wales has direct access to young people whilst at school and are well-positioned to promote apprenticeship opportunities. This can help pupils make informed decisions about their potential career aspiration and the correct learning pathway they need to take. However, it is disappointing that Careers Wales resources have been significantly reduced over the years making it difficult to provide comprehensive guidance on apprenticeships to all pupils. In the best cases, Careers Advisors provide one-to-one guidance and are well informed in relation to current and future career pathways and employment trends both locally and across Wales. In many cases, teachers and Careers Advisors lack up-to-date knowledge about apprenticeships, particularly in emerging sectors like green and digital. If teachers and Careers Advisors were afforded the time to effectively engage with Apprenticeship Providers, this can support their understanding of apprenticeship pathways and the wide-ranging career and employment opportunities available. NPTC Group of Colleges, has established Employer Groups in North and South Powys which also includes representatives from education. This is helping with the sharing of knowledge between businesses and schools. Many of the challenges in relation to the lack of awareness and misconceptions of apprenticeships are also prevalent with other adult referral agencies. Whatever improvements are made to respond to the challenges in relation to promotion of apprenticeship pathways, this would need to be appropriately adapted to suit both young people and adults.

Some schools have well-established links with local employers. These employers attend school events to promote their company and future career opportunities. This works well where a company has the infrastructure for their representative to attend. However, this is time consuming and is exceedingly difficult for an employer to attend all schools within their locality. Consequently, this can then become sporadic and not a sustainable model. It can also provide young people with an inconsistent overview of sectors and potential apprenticeship opportunities that are available. The accessibility for Apprenticeship Providers to speak to pupils is inconsistent across the regions, and when it does happen schools tend to direct the Provider representative to the lower ability pupils. It can be difficult for Apprenticeship Providers to speak with the more able and talented pupils as in many cases it is a foregone conclusion that

these pupils will transition to A Levels and go on to university, leaving apprenticeships as an undervalued alternative. The Welsh Government must provide local education authorities with a clear directive that all schools present apprenticeships as a credible, high-quality option alongside academic routes and that young people of all abilities are provided with a first-hand insight into apprenticeship pathways. It should ensure that providers are welcomed in schools and are afforded the time to provide pupils with impartial advice and guidance on the apprenticeship pathways.

Pupils attending work experience placements during school are not always aligned to their career aspirations or local industry needs, limiting their value. Work experience can be invaluable in supporting young people's job readiness and enhance their employability skills. Some employers find it difficult to offer meaningful work experience opportunities due to resource constraints or concerns about insurance and supervision. To address these challenges, the development of a virtual careers programme that is dedicated to promoting and raising young people's knowledge of apprenticeship pathways and opportunities could be a solution. This type of programme could be aligned to current and future employment trends.

Where a Further Education College resides within a local authority area which is tertiary, this allows for active school liaison activities to take place between the College and the local feeder schools. As an apprenticeship provider within a College, we seek to benefit from this relationship in the promotion of apprenticeships, however, this is sometimes lost in the College-wide information being shared.

Apprenticeship Providers use many external events to promote their apprenticeship provision, including Apprenticeship Week activities, career fairs, Apprenticeship Award Evenings and Graduations, open days/evenings, employer breakfasts and business networking events and awards evenings. The Apprenticeship Awards Cymru is a fantastic celebration of Apprenticeships in Wales as it showcases the valuable contribution apprentices play within their workplaces and the economy and recognises the commitment of employers in the development of the apprentices' skills and experience. It is unfortunate that the Welsh Government has made the decision not to support this event this year. Launching high-profile campaigns to promote the benefits of apprenticeships targeting students, parents, and employers works well. Localised and targeted marketing can also be successful, although this can be an expensive overhead for Apprenticeship Providers.

Apprenticeship Providers have well-established links with a wide range of employers and use these relationships well to promote the benefits of apprenticeships to secure current and future sustained employment opportunities for school leavers and non-employed adults. Providers collaborate closely with employers to promote and raise awareness of how to access the most appropriate apprenticeship programme that will support their company's upskilling and/or re-training requirements. Providers also engage with employer representative bodies that help to ensure apprenticeship programmes align with regional labour market needs.

There is some evidence of good practice in promoting apprenticeships and providing meaningful work experience in Wales. Strengthening partnerships between stakeholders, expanding employer engagement, and promoting apprenticeships as a credible option are critical steps to ensure the success of these initiatives. With

targeted improvements, Wales can better prepare young people for meaningful careers while addressing the needs of the economy.

Question 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.

Response: Apprenticeship pathways in Wales are designed to be accessible to all young people, but in practice, there are barriers that disproportionately affect certain demographic groups and geographical areas. Apprenticeships in Wales is an all-age fully funded programme that provides access for young people and for those individuals 25+ years of age that wish to re-train or upskill. Apprenticeships are offered across a wide range of sectors catering to diverse interests and skillsets.

Despite government funding, apprenticeships can still be challenging for low-income families due to associated costs such as transport, equipment, or lower wages compared to full-time employment. This issue can disproportionately affect young people in economically deprived areas. The apprenticeship rates of pay need to be urgently reviewed as it is becoming more of a barrier to young people who can secure employment on much higher salaries. In the longer-term young people will have the ability to earn higher rates of pay following an apprenticeship, but with the current cost of living crisis, some young people are making the decision to either leave their apprenticeship programme early and secure alternative employment or they are not considering the programme as a valid option.

Apprenticeships in sectors such as construction and engineering remain male-dominated, while sectors like childcare and beauty are female-dominated. Gender stereotypes can discourage young people from entering non-traditional fields, perpetuating workforce imbalances. More role models in non-traditional sectors can help to resolve this issue, especially for young women and girls. Welsh Government/Medr could consider a bursary for those apprentices who would like to become Ambassadors, like that of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Ambassador programme.

Parental influence plays a huge role in the decisions young people make during and following their school lives. Many parents lack a full understanding of apprenticeships and how they can positively align with future employment and career progression and because of this, there can be less encouragement for their children to pursue them. Promoting and raising awareness of apprenticeships to parents, guardians or carers is equally important as it is with the young people themselves. If Apprenticeship Providers have access to pupils in schools and invitations to attend school opening evening events, they could inform parents about the benefits of apprenticeships through positive discussions and first-hand experiences.

Certain ethnic groups, particularly Black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals, are underrepresented in apprenticeships in Wales. This may stem from a lack of targeted outreach or cultural perceptions about vocational training. Apprenticeships may be undervalued by families who prioritise academic pathways as a route to higher-paying jobs, creating cultural barriers. Pairing apprentices with mentors from similar backgrounds to provide guidance and encouragement can go some way to addressing

this issue. More national campaigns to promote apprenticeships to underrepresented groups is needed.

The wide range of apprenticeships are less readily available in rural areas, where there may be fewer businesses or industries able to offer these employment opportunities. Young people in rural areas can often face long commutes to workplaces and training centres, which can be a financial and logistical burden. The increased use of remote and hybrid learning is helping to overcome some of the barriers faced by some young people in rural areas.

There continues to be hesitancy by some employers to recruit apprentices with disabilities due to misconceptions about their capabilities or concerns over making the necessary workplace adjustments. Apprenticeship Providers are promoting the financial incentive available to employers to support the recruitment of more disabled apprentices.

School Engagement has been covered in depth in a previous response, however, the lack of, or misinformation of apprenticeships within schools is most definitely a barrier. Schools need to improve their awareness and information in relation to apprenticeships and promoting them as a credible option for school leavers, and not just to those young people that are at risk of becoming NEET. Schools must provide all young people with impartial advice and guidance and provide equal emphasis on apprenticeships alongside academic routes in career guidance sessions. Consideration could also be given to introducing apprenticeship awareness raising initiatives at a younger age, such as during Key Stage 3.

While apprenticeship pathways in Wales are open to all young people in principle, significant barriers hinder equal access for certain demographic groups and geographical areas. Targeted efforts are needed to address financial constraints, promote inclusivity, and improve outreach and employer engagement. By taking a proactive and inclusive approach, Wales can ensure that apprenticeship pathways genuinely serve all young people and contribute to a more equitable and skilled workforce.

Question 6 - The Welsh Government's role: How policies support apprenticeship pathways and any barriers that need addressing 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.

Response: The Welsh Government, along with key stakeholders, play a crucial role in identifying economic and skills needs to inform apprenticeship frameworks and the delivery of qualifications. The Welsh Government sets the overarching policy framework and strategies aimed at addressing economic and workforce skills needs. This includes developing policies that align with the needs of local and national industries, ensuring economic growth and the creation of high-quality jobs.

The Welsh Government regularly conducts labour market analysis, research, and consultations to identify emerging skills gaps and future industry needs. This helps to inform the design and updating of apprenticeship frameworks and qualifications. The

Welsh Government collaborates with employers and industry representatives to ensure that apprenticeship frameworks are relevant and meet the needs of the current and future labour market. Employers are critical in providing real-time data on the skills and qualifications required in their sectors. They communicate the technical skills, knowledge, and competencies they need in the workforce. However, one of the most challenging issues facing the Welsh Government is correctly interpreting the dialogue from the employer network as their collaboration can often predominantly involve larger companies that have the infrastructure and/or staffing resources to engage in consultation and discussion. This means that the views of micro businesses and SMEs are not considered during any major decision making. Micro businesses and SMEs make up a substantial proportion of the businesses in Wales and therefore are vital in contributing to any changes being made in the re-design or improvement of the Apprenticeship Programme.

Apprenticeship Providers have well-established relationships with a wide range of employers within their regions. They use these relationships to ensure that the curriculum for apprenticeships reflects up-to-date skills and knowledge. They also help to deliver the qualifications and ensure that apprentices have access to the right resources. Apprenticeship Providers often function as intermediaries, providing feedback from employers, and other stakeholders, which can influence the continuous improvement of apprenticeship frameworks. Providers also use their well-established relationships with apprentices to gather valuable feedback about what skills are relevant in their fields and how apprenticeship frameworks can be improved. This helps ensure that apprenticeships meet both individual career goals and industry needs. The Welsh Government and Medr would benefit with closer collaboration with Apprenticeship Providers to use the 'real time' important labour market intelligence that they regularly collect. This will help to ensure that apprenticeship frameworks are responsive to the changing demands of the labour market and ensure that qualifications and training are relevant and effective.

Apprenticeship Providers work closely with the Regional Learning Skills Partnership (RLSPs). Many provider representatives make an effective contribution to various RLSP working groups. Providers take good account of the RLSP Employment Skills Plans, which they consider along with other available important labour market intelligence. This information, and that from other employer strategic groups, supports Providers in identifying and communicating economic and skills' needs to inform the development of apprenticeship frameworks and the delivery of qualifications.

Welsh Government policies provide a solid foundation for supporting apprenticeship pathways, with strong commitments to inclusivity, regional alignment, and economic relevance. Targeted efforts to simplify processes, enhance employer engagement, and promote apprenticeships as a credible option, will better support workforce development and economic growth.

Skills Academy Wales Work-Based Learning Partnership @ NPTC Group of Colleges

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