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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP28

Evidence from: Universities Wales



Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee consultation on Apprenticeship Pathways

February 2025

About Universities Wales

Universities Wales represents the interests of universities in Wales. Our membership encompasses the Vice Chancellors of all the universities in Wales and the Open University in Wales. Our mission is to support a university education system which transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world.

Universities Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's inquiry.

Key Messages

- **Degree apprenticeships provide a valuable contribution to the higher-level skills pipeline in Wales.** For some of Wales' universities, degree apprenticeships are of strategic importance, and have successfully widened access to higher education for cohorts less likely to undertake a traditional degree course.
- **Universities successfully partner with industry** to deliver degree apprenticeships across the available frameworks: advanced manufacturing, engineering, digital and construction.
- **Positive Outcomes:** These programs demonstrate high engagement, strong student performance, excellent retention and attainment rates, and diversify the university's offerings.
- **A significant expansion of degree apprenticeships beyond the current frameworks is required** if degree apprenticeships are to play a role in meeting the future high skill needs of Wales. This would enable more learners to access higher-level skills. There is appetite from students, universities and professional bodies for expansion into health and social care, teacher training, professional services and management, and childhood and youth studies. These align with demand for a highly-skilled workforce across Wales. Without expansion, Wales risks losing good students to degree apprenticeship programmes across the border in England. For example, Exeter University offers 19 courses.

- As awarding bodies, Welsh universities should be given greater freedom to design and deliver apprenticeships in partnership with businesses. The current framework system, which relies on Welsh Government resource to develop, simply can't work at the pace required to match the rapidly developing technological skills required for the future of the Welsh economy.
- Beyond degree apprenticeship programmes, Welsh universities make a significant contribution to the skills pipeline in Wales, with a significant proportion of degrees having a vocational element and/or professional accreditation attached. Despite this, no higher education sector body has yet been invited to provide the Committee with oral evidence.

Recommendations

- Improved pathways to higher-level skills – there needs to be greater cohesion and vertical alignment of courses and qualifications to allow for learners to progress from level 1 and 2 apprenticeships through to level 6 or 7.
- Expansion of degree apprenticeship frameworks – in order to achieve this, many more frameworks must be rapidly developed to allow for learners in Wales to progress to higher-level skills via a seamless apprenticeship route across a far broader spectrum of skills than is currently on offer.
- A move away from the current funding mechanisms and constraints on the development of frameworks would provide Welsh universities and industry greater freedom to develop degree apprenticeships, where they are currently hampered by annualised funding awards arriving late in the planning year and limited Welsh Government capacity, meaning development of much-needed frameworks is inefficient and cannot keep pace with workplace developments. Having to work to multiple frameworks across the UK also causes unnecessary burden and consideration should be given to alignment with England.
- The role of apprenticeships must be understood within the wider skills agenda along with other work-based learning qualifications and more traditional routes of study to higher-level skills. A significant proportion of degrees undertaken at Welsh universities have a vocational element and are professionally accredited. Apprenticeship pathways are only a small part of the picture in developing the higher-level skills needed for the future of the Welsh economy, and increased engagement with all forms of higher education is vital for upskilling the nation to meet demand.

Responses to consultation questions

- 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 is a limited range of degree apprenticeships available in Wales due to only having three operational frameworks at present. Apprentices wishing to pursue certain careers will not be able to achieve beyond level 4 via an apprenticeship route outside of engineering, advanced manufacturing and construction.

When compared to England, Wales has far fewer opportunities for degree apprenticeships. England has around 101 frameworks on offer, from dental hygiene to space systems engineering. Scotland has 13 frameworks available, and Wales has just three.

For learners studying subjects not yet available at degree apprenticeship level in Wales, mapping out a career route through apprenticeships either leads to a dead end of development or to entering more formal pathways of study. For example, there is a large pool of Learning Support Assistants that would benefit from being able to access teacher training via an apprenticeship route. This would allow them to earn and learn, while still fulfilling their primary function and eventually increasing the pool of trained teachers – and particularly ones who are likely to remain in the workforce. For many of these, already balancing family needs and a full-time job, accessing higher education in addition to their work can be challenging.

Ideally, when a student enrolls on their first apprenticeship, a career pathway should be available to them through stackable qualifications that can be gained through a range of apprenticeships at different levels, up to level 6 or 7.

Universities Wales understands that the need for vertical integration across all levels, and ideally up to level 7, is something that Medr is in the process of evaluating. The opportunity for a learner to take up an apprenticeship at level 2 and progress up to a degree apprenticeship is the ideal, but provision is not yet seamless.

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

Degree apprenticeships is one route of many to upskill the nation and develop our skills pipeline. By 2035, Wales will need [400,000 additional graduates](#) to take on higher-skilled employment, and degree apprentices will contribute to the future Welsh economy alongside university graduates as the workplace changes and technologies advance.

It should be noted that a significant proportion of qualifications delivered by Welsh universities have a vocational element and are professionally accredited. For example, ~68% of Cardiff Metropolitan University's courses are accredited by professional bodies. The University of Wales Trinity St David has 57 courses accredited by 29 different professional bodies. Degree apprenticeships are a small part of the pipeline for generating the highly skilled graduates required by the Welsh economy.

The frameworks currently available reflect priority areas for economic development – advanced manufacturing, digital, engineering and construction. Universities Wales understands Medr is exploring the development of a renewable energies framework which would be a beneficial addition to the offer.

Beyond this, there is appetite among education providers and industry for expansion of degree apprenticeship pathways to include creative studies, design, health and social care, management, legal, financial services, quantity surveying, teacher training, early years, media and journalism, and accountancy. There is also demand for degree apprenticeships up to Level 7 (Masters) which would further benefit the economy and mirror what is available in England.

On an individual economic impact level, degree apprentices are able to support the economy in the same way that graduates of any traditional degree might do. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the way degree apprentices apply their skills are leading to innovation in business processes.

As a result of their qualifications, children of graduates (via any route) are [more likely to enter advanced levels of qualification themselves](#), supporting Welsh industry to thrive and filling skills gaps in the Welsh economy.

As noted in a [recent report](#) by David Willetts for King's College London, there is a direct gain to the exchequer of an individual enrolling in an undergraduate courses of around £110,000 for men and £30,000 for women. These graduates also have increased spending power, contributing further to the Welsh economy.

- **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.**

Due to the current funding mechanisms and particularly the timing of funding allocations, it is easier for universities to engage with larger companies and public bodies than SMEs. Inflexibility with funding also makes it harder for universities to respond to demand from industry, for example an employer may wish for four start dates per year). This has also been the experience in England, a recent report by the [Edge Foundation](#) notes that there were issues with engagement with SMEs as there is little immediate return on investment for resource-poor businesses. The compliance-driven setup of degree apprenticeships is resource intensive, and in the current form cannot easily deliver to a wide range of stakeholders.

Annualised funding awards, often late within the academic year, continue to have implications for the nature of employers engaged in the programme. It has led to a tendency for universities and FE Colleges to pursue larger employers who may offer a greater number of apprentice enrolments. It also encouraged these institutions to work with employers with whom they had a pre-existing relationship (as securing engagement to a programme with no guarantee of funding proved more challenging with those where there was no prior relationship). In the current financial climate, universities cannot

afford to be embarking on partnerships and delivering degree apprenticeships that generate a loss.

Were more, longer-term (rather than annualised) and more flexible funding available to support the activity, it may be possible to expand this net and engage with a wider range of stakeholders. Expanding the frameworks to include such things as teacher training for classroom assistants would allow universities to deliver at scale in the way that institutions in England can.

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

There is still some element of confusion around degree apprenticeships. Applications to degree apprenticeships must come via employers rather than the more traditional UCAS route for undergraduate courses at university.

Much of the early activity in this area has been focused on employers upskilling existing employees, although there is some sense that this situation is slowly changing with companies keen to recruit at 18 and to grow their own apprentices from scratch. The [Office for National Statistics](#) is a good example of where entry routes to a degree apprenticeship scheme are flexible with the organisation noting that entry qualifications can come from A level or apprenticeship routes. As they grow in the public consciousness, school leavers' awareness of this route is now changing and Wales is behind the curve.

Were more frameworks and funding available, leading to more opportunities to operate at scale with less regulatory drag, and if messaging were clearer and located centrally, then it would be possible to eliminate the lack of clarity that learners and businesses sometimes have.

Welsh Government's [evaluation report published in 2023](#) made recommendations for public awareness about degree apprenticeships, including:

Welsh Government should support promotion of the programme through the provision of a wrap-around campaign to raise awareness of Degree Apprenticeship among employers and potential apprentices and within schools and FE Colleges.

- **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.**

Due to degree apprenticeship provision currently being limited and generally more accessible to larger organisations, areas of Wales with fewer businesses or public bodies tend to have fewer degree apprenticeship opportunities.

More opportunities should be made available by expanding the frameworks and providing the opportunity for universities to engage with the small and medium-sized businesses that tend to exist in these areas. In some providers' experience, degree apprenticeships have attracted, retained and upskilled cohorts of students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Consideration should be given to what specific support could be given to potential apprentices from these areas and backgrounds.

- **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.**

Universities Wales would recommend that Welsh Government continue to support the expansion of degree apprenticeships into new frameworks, in line with demand from industry.

There is a need for improved public awareness of how degree apprenticeships operate, and support for SMEs to engage, which would be enhanced by funding being awarded sooner, allowing more time for businesses to apply.

Regional Skills Partnerships have a relevant role to play in liaising with Medr on skills gaps and demand from industry, which sits alongside Welsh Government steers on sectors in which the skills pipeline should be developed as a priority for the Welsh economy.

There needs to be greater cohesion and vertical alignment to allow for learners to progress from level 1 and 2 apprenticeships through to level 6 or 7.