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Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig

Ymchwiliad: Llwybrau prentisiaeth

Cyf: AP30

Ymateb gan: Estyn

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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP30

Evidence from: Estyn



Ymateb i Ymgynghoriad / Consultation Response

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Pwnc / Subject:	Apprenticeship pathways

Background information about Estyn

Estyn is the Office of His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. As a Crown body, we are independent of the Welsh Government.

Our principal aim is to raise the standards and quality education and training in Wales. This is primarily set out in the Learning and Skills Act 2000¹ and the Education Act 2005. In exercising its functions, we must give regard to the:

- Quality of education and training in Wales;
- Extent to which education and training meets the needs of learners;
- Educational standards achieved by those receiving education and training in Wales;
- Quality of leadership and management of those education and training providers, including whether the financial resources made available to those providing education and training are managed efficiently and used in a way which provides value for money;
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of learners; and,
- Contribution made to the well-being of learners.

Our remit includes (but is not exclusive to) nurseries and non-maintained settings, primary, secondary, special and all age schools, independent schools, pupil referrals units, further education, adult community learning, local government education services, work-based learning, and initial teacher training.

We may give advice to the Welsh Parliament on any matter connected to education and training in Wales. To achieve excellence for learners, we have set three strategic objectives:

¹ This act to be replaced by the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 when the quality provisions are commenced.

- Provide accountability to service users on the quality and standards of education and training in Wales;
- Inform the development of national policy by the Welsh Government;
- Build capacity for improvement of the education and training system in Wales.

This response is not confidential.

Purpose of the consultation

The [Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee](#) is undertaking an inquiry into apprenticeship pathways.

The Committee is seeking views on the following terms of reference:

- 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.
- Economy: The extent to which apprenticeship pathways support the needs of Welsh businesses and contribute to filling skills gaps in 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.
- Information about apprenticeships: Good practice between careers services, schools, colleges and employers in terms of promoting apprenticeships and the provision of meaningful work experience.
- 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.
- 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.

Response from Estyn

- Estyn welcomes the focus being given to apprenticeships. Overall our work shows that apprenticeships are a vital part of meeting our skills needs. They are valued by apprentices and employers and we have seen apprenticeship providers work well with partners the plan provision to meet regional needs. Good progress has also been made in how providers support the individual needs of apprentices, for example in relation to any additional learning needs.

However, work is needed to continue to ensure the full benefits of apprenticeship pathways can be realised. In particular:

- The promotion and mapping of apprenticeship pathways between levels 2-5 is underdeveloped and not undertaken at a national level.
- There is no clear national strategy for 16-19 learning and too much inconsistency between, and within, areas and providers.
- Too many learners lack awareness of work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships. Very few are aware of the wide range of apprenticeship pathways whilst choosing their post-16 destination at school.
- Funding cuts have reduced the number of apprenticeship starts.
- The naming of the junior apprenticeship programme is problematic. It is a pre-apprenticeship programme and similar programmes are called different names. It is not an apprenticeship, and not designed necessarily with a progression into an apprenticeship in mind.
- Consideration needs to be given to funding less apprenticeships, especially at higher apprenticeship level, for learners who have been undertaking their work roles for many years. This currently limits the number of new entrants. Apprenticeships should be available from level 2 in nearly all learning areas to make sure learners of all abilities have an entry point into employment and training.

- **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.

We agree that this is an important aspect to consider. We have provided some commentary below that may help the committee to consider its work on this aspect.

Junior apprenticeships

Junior apprenticeships do not give learners the same opportunities that are available to learners in apprenticeship programmes, such as being employed and undertaking an approved apprenticeship framework in a defined trade or occupation. The programme was devised by a further education college, others have replicated and a few deliver similar programmes with a different title. As a result, the title is mis-leading to key stakeholders, including schools, parents and carers and employers.

As identified in our review of junior apprenticeships in Wales¹, a junior apprenticeship programme refers to a range of vocationally focused full-time programmes that are based in further education colleges for Year 10 and Year 11 pupils. These programmes are funded by schools, local authorities and the Welsh

Government. Therefore, they are a pre-apprenticeship programme, rather than an apprenticeship pathway.

Learner destination data indicates that many junior apprentices progress directly onto mainstream post-16 further education programmes on completion of their junior apprenticeship programme, with a few progressing onto Jobs Growth Wales Plus or apprenticeship programmes.

However, at the time of our visits, junior apprenticeship programmes were only being delivered in five of the twenty-two local authorities throughout Wales. Where junior apprenticeship programmes are delivered, they are in a small number of vocational areas, predominantly in construction and hair and beauty.

Access to junior apprenticeship programmes is mostly targeted to specific pupils or groups of pupils. Places tend to be prioritised for those who were struggling to engage with mainstream school provision and were particularly at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). These programmes are not available on an open access basis to all Year 10 and 11 pupils. While we found a lot of value in these programmes for the pupils accessing them, this targeting has the potential to miscommunicate the potential value of apprenticeships as a post-16 option for all young people.

As part of this review, we believe that the committee should:

- take account of the full findings from our junior apprenticeships review
- consider how the current junior apprenticeship programme should be developed so that it is offered as an equitably accessible option for all pupils in Year 10 and 11

Foundation apprenticeship, apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship

Although there are pathways from level 2 to level 4 across many apprenticeship learning areas, this is not the case across all sectors. In a number of sectors, the apprenticeship entry point is at level three. To ensure access to training for all learners and progression pathways, it is essential that all learning areas are available from level 2..

The promotion and mapping of apprenticeship pathways between levels 2-5 is underdeveloped and not undertaken at a national level. There are very few examples of regional collaboration between providers and regional skills partnerships to clearly map provision and progression pathways. This makes it challenging for existing or potential apprentices to get a full and impartial understanding of what pathways are available to them in their region.

Apprenticeship starts in Wales are categorised under 13 broad sector subject areas (SSA). Within each sector subject area sits a list of apprenticeship frameworks that have been delivered across each of the three apprenticeship levels. For foundation apprenticeships (level 2), apprenticeships (level 3) and higher apprenticeships (level 4+) there are a wide range of sectors and occupations that learners can access through a mature network of ten lead providers of apprenticeships pan-Wales. Through our inspection activity, we find

that where learners have entered an apprenticeship at a particular level, they are made aware of the opportunities available to them to progress to a higher-level apprenticeship pathway if their job allows.

Degree apprenticeships

There are a limited number of occupational sectors where degree apprenticeships are available in Wales. These were initially in IT, engineering and advanced manufacturing, and the offer has more recently been expanded to include construction. There are no degree apprenticeship pathways for sectors where skills gaps are also apparent in more female-dominated professions, such as health and social care.

The commissioning of delivery of degree apprenticeships has created a splintered network of apprenticeship providers, with the previously existing network of apprenticeship providers now delivering up to level 5 and higher education institutions (HEIs) delivering degree apprenticeships. Although, there are examples of HEIs delivering in partnership with apprenticeship providers, there is the potential for competition or duplication between degree programmes, degree apprenticeships and high apprenticeship programmes leading to a lack of coherent apprenticeship pathways. For example, many work-based learning providers have existing higher apprenticeship programmes that encompass higher national certificate or higher national diploma qualifications at levels 4 or 5. In their first year, most degree apprenticeship programmes mirror what a higher apprentice would study at higher national certificate or higher national diploma qualification level. That means there are two networks of apprenticeship providers potentially competing for learners at level 4 and 5.

A potential solution would be for apprenticeships at all levels to be delivered through one network of work-based learning providers, ensuring a consistent specification for providers at all levels of apprenticeship. This would require closer collaboration between HEIs and providers at other levels to ensure pathways are transparent and arbitrary competition is removed. Such an approach is commensurate with the Medr strategic objectives, which seeks to bring tertiary education closer together and create coherent pathways. The HEIs would retain the degree awarding powers for the qualifications linked to the degree apprenticeships.

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

In the Estyn [review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales](#), we found substantial differences in the options available to learners within their local area after they complete Year 11. The available options are also strongly influenced by a learner's preferred language choice and educational attainment. Overall, current arrangements for curriculum planning and delivery are not working well enough.

There is no clear national strategy for 16-19 learning and too much inconsistency between, and within, areas and providers.

We also found that learners' awareness and understanding of the choices available to them varied considerably depending on the quality of information and advice provided to them. Too many learners lacked awareness of work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships.

Through our inspection activity, we find that lead providers of apprenticeships plan their provision well to meet the needs of their local communities and regions. They are generally well informed by, and well represented at, regional skills partnerships and industry forums. We see that providers are generally responsive and adaptable to meeting emerging skills needs, for example, the incorporation of electric and hybrid technologies into motor vehicle apprenticeships, or the skills required for renewable heating technologies in construction apprenticeships.

Employers, almost without exception, are positive about the impact that recruiting and retaining apprentices has on their business. Apprentices are generally encouraged to progress to the next higher level of apprenticeship.

In many instances, providers have long-standing relationships with a range of key employers, with whom they repeatedly enrol cohorts of apprentices year-on-year, creating highly skilled and well-paid apprenticeship opportunities for the local region. Where these employers are multi-national businesses, they will have considerable influence over how, and in which sectors, providers will plan their apprenticeship pathways.

The inherent risk, however, where providers use repeat employers for regular cohorts of learners, is the over-reliance on large employer contracts versus engaging with SME and micro businesses, who typically will not have the resources or offer the economy of scale of apprentice recruitment. This is a particular risk as providers are responding to cuts in funding and are having to make difficult cost-saving decisions on where to allocate their resources. Opportunities exist to engage substantially more employers in apprenticeships, especially for new entrant learners. However, funding needs to be available to support these additional starts.

Apprenticeship providers are attempting to meet the needs of the economy by delivering large volumes of apprenticeships in the health and social care sector, where employers have a legislative requirement to train their workforce. This results in a regular and large demand for these apprenticeship pathways at levels 2 and 3 across Wales. The healthcare and public services sector has traditionally recruited the largest proportion of all starts in Wales. In the healthcare and public services sectors, more than two thirds of all starts are in health and social care frameworks, including leadership & professional practice in health and social care. Childcare, including leadership, represents the next highest number of starts. However, during our inspections and when undertaking other activities, we find that not all employers are meeting their obligation to fully support their apprentices in these sectors. For example, apprentices are not given time off during their working hours to complete assessments or attend off-the-job training or this time

is removed at short notice due to the ongoing demands of their role and the needs of their employers. This is a sector wide challenge, linked to other recruitment challenges in these sectors.

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

Schools independent advice and guidance

Our evidence shows that in the best cases, there are effective partnerships across local areas between schools, Careers Wales, colleges, employers and apprenticeship providers who work together to promote and advertise the apprenticeship vacancies available in their area. However, this type of partnership working is variable across Wales and apprenticeship providers can find it difficult to engage with schools. This issue tends to be more prevalent in local authorities that have a high proportion of schools with sixth forms where there is more competition for learners at post-16 level. The information available to pupils when considering their choices is often too limited, with apprenticeships often seen as inferior to opting for A-levels or full-time university degrees.

Through our discussions with apprentices during apprenticeship activities, very few say they were aware of the wide range of apprenticeship pathways whilst choosing their post-16 destination at school. In many cases, learners follow paths such as A-levels and university before accessing an apprenticeship at a later stage in their lives.

The apprenticeship vacancy service is the 'one stop shop' where providers and employers are encouraged to advertise their apprenticeship vacancies. However, in practice, very few providers and employers use this service and, as a result, apprenticeship vacancies advertised on the site are generally limited.

- **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.

Additional learning needs

The number of apprentices with an identified additional learning need (ALN) or disability has increased steadily over the last few years. There has been a notable increase in learners identified as having a disability. Dyslexia remains the most common learning need identified. The number of learners with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) has steadily increased over the years, aligning with a growing awareness and diagnosis. Through our inspection activity, we have seen significant improvements amongst providers in the capacity and ability to identify, diagnose, support and progress learners with ALN.

Ethnicity

Learners from ethnic minority backgrounds have been historically under-represented in apprenticeships. However, the picture has improved considerably in recent years. Between 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 the proportion of new starts by

learners from ethnic minority backgrounds increased gradually from 3.1% to 4.9%. In 2022-2023, this more than doubled to 10.2%.

Gender

Historically, the gender split in a number of sector subject areas has shown significant dominance or underrepresentation of either male or female apprentices. There has been concerted effort to try and redress the balance in some sectors, particularly in recent years for females into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and construction apprenticeships. Females historically are most underrepresented in engineering, construction and manufacturing. The most dominant sectors for female starts are in hair and beauty, healthcare and public services and business administration. Given the high volumes of health and public services starts across the nation, that roughly 80% of all those starts are female apprentices would be a key factor in the overall gender split being more female dominant (60%). It also needs to be considered that, in most cases, employers recruit their apprentices.

Welsh language

The committee should consider the equity of opportunity for apprentices to use and develop their Welsh language skills. Currently, the number of learners who choose to complete written work or assessments in Welsh is low.

- **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 (RSPs) and other stakeholders in identifying and communicating economic and skills needs to inform apprenticeship frameworks and the delivery of qualifications.

Funding cuts

A key barrier to the development of apprenticeship pathways is the current and future funding settlement offered for apprenticeships in Wales. In the 2024-2025 contract year, a blanket 14% cut was undertaken across the board to apprenticeship providers, with relatively little prior notice. The key headline impact of these cuts has been independently evaluated by the Centre for Economics and Business Research as follows:

- nearly 6,000 fewer apprenticeship starts in Wales this year
- a £50.3 million 'short run' impact on the economy
- the health and social care and construction sectors being impacted the most
- funding cuts are disproportionately affecting the most deprived within the Welsh population

Eligibility

As part of its annual contract commission to providers, Welsh Government set out its eligibility requirements for which learners can access apprenticeships dependent on their age, their sector and also their length of service within their

existing job role. There have been occasions in the recent past where apprenticeships in Wales have been all-age programmes, regardless of learners' age, sector or length of service.

Consideration needs to be given to funding apprenticeships, especially at higher apprenticeship level, for learners who have been undertaking their work roles for many years and have no desire to seek promotion or alternative employment as a result of their apprenticeships.

Construction

A particular exception to effective pathways has resulted from the recent reforms to construction apprenticeships, with the introduction of an enhanced level 3 apprenticeship and the removal of the level 2 apprenticeship. This requires entrants to the level 3 programme to have a higher level of literacy and numeracy baseline skills to enter the programme.

There is now no exit point for apprentices at level 2 in construction trades. Early indications are that this is having a negative impact on learners' ability to enter the programme at level 3. There are also indications that the lack of a level 2 pathway in this sector has had a knock-on impact on apprenticeship starts, with employers seemingly less inclined to commit to a 3-year or 4-year level 3 programme, when their skills needs are at level 2, and can be achieved in less time.

Medr

A key strategic priority for Medr, as part of its inaugural strategic plan, is to consult and decide on how it will commission or procure apprenticeship delivery at the end of the current contract cycle. Part of the decision-making process should include how to best facilitate the development of coherent apprenticeship pathways at all levels, including degree apprenticeships. This includes delivery, assessment and quality assurance.

Additional reading

[¹ A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales](#)

[² Impartial careers advice and guidance to young people aged 14-16 years provided by Careers Wales advisers](#)

[A review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales](#)