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Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig

Ymchwiliad: Llwybrau prentisiaeth

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Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas Contractwyr Trydanol Cymru (ECA)

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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP31

Evidence from: Electrical Contractors' Association Wales (ECA)



Submission to the Review of Apprenticeship Pathways from the Electrical Contractors' Association in Wales

The Electrical Contractors' Association (ECA) is the leading trade body representing electrical and electro-technical contractors. We represent hundreds of businesses in Wales, and nearly 3,000 Member firms across the UK with an annual revenue in excess of £6 billion.

As system designers and installers, our Member firms are in the vanguard of the shift to smart infrastructure and low carbon technologies. They are crucial to helping Wales achieve its net zero targets. Our Members are key to a rapidly expanding renewable energy sector, including the electrification of transport, decarbonising heat and buildings, and the installation of energy infrastructure such as Electric Vehicle Charging Points.

ECA is in the business of finding solutions to the skills shortages which, if unaddressed, will slow down the energy transition. Our industry already employs 30,000 apprentices across the UK – including almost 2000 in Wales – and is keen to attract more talented young people into highly skilled and well-paid jobs in the electrical industry in Wales.

With a rapid increase in electrification, it is vital all new technologies are installed safely without any interruption to the supply. By employing qualified electricians to carry out installations to the highest safety standards, our Members ensure the risk of electrical fires, power outages and grid capacity issues are minimized.

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.

Apprenticeships in Wales must be tailored to what employers need, focusing on sectors vital to a growing economy, such as electrification. The engineering services sector operates across all sectors, from construction to energy, meaning it often falls between the gaps when engagement with industry takes place. Its career progression routes are often therefore neglected, despite it being an essential pillar of the economy.

In construction there is too much focus on the CITB scope and civil engineering and building apprenticeships. Development of degree apprenticeships, which tend to

lead to management and professional careers has to date ignored BSE degree apprenticeships.

There is potential for career progression for electricians to move into energy, digital technology, engineering and business management. But there is a need for stronger engagement with industry to map out current and potential progression routes both within and across sectors to overcome the current siloed sectoral approach to apprenticeships.

The theory and practice of apprenticeship provision don't necessarily align. Colleges may ignore or withdraw specific courses if they believe they aren't viable locally, without proper industry engagement or strategic consideration of the wider needs of the Welsh economy. This leaves employers and learners without appropriate training provision, suppressing opportunities for progression.

The challenges outlined above could be overcome by significantly stronger engagement with industry. Existing framework models for engagement with industry to develop progression pathways exist, for example the IfATE occupational maps in England.

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

A shortage of electrical apprentices impacts all sectors of the Welsh economy. Electrical apprenticeships are the primary route for qualifying new electricians who are crucial to the Welsh Government's net zero ambitions, as well as providing a host of well paid jobs across the whole of Wales.

It is heartening to see an appropriate level of funding per learner for electrical apprenticeships in Wales, as well as high demand from individuals and employers. Nevertheless, apprentice starts are not as high as they could be or need to be to equip the future workforce to electrify Wales. In 2023/24 electrical starts dropped by 20%, with evidence of local rationing of places by colleges. Recent cuts to the apprenticeship budget in 2024/25 are likely to compound the issue.

The establishment of Level 2 Foundation and Progression qualifications is not necessarily translating into higher rates of progression into the Level 3 apprenticeship; the route necessary to become a qualified electrician. This data is not collected in a meaningful way. We anticipate progression rates might get worse in Wales in the short term as classroom based course numbers increase and apprenticeship numbers fall.

Employers have a range of issues related to the delivery of electrical apprenticeship courses. The quality and delivery of some courses do not meet industry expectations.

Apprenticeship delivery in Wales is perceived by employers to be very rigid, with a reported lack of willingness from colleges to be more flexible to align with employer and industry expectations.

To support the needs of Welsh businesses and contribute to filling skills gaps in the Welsh economy we need more industry involvement and closer industry- provider collaboration when planning and delivering apprenticeship pathways. A solution would be a joint government and industry apprenticeship strategy to target apprenticeship recruitment and progression to benefit 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.

There is value in restoring and increasing employer financial incentives, prioritising the smallest businesses.

Evidence from The Electrotechnical Careers Partnership's (TESP) research shows a negative net return on investment for a business during the first two years of taking on an apprentice. (With the positive return of investment coming in only during the third and fourth years).

The vast majority of electrotechnical firms are SMEs. Small businesses lack the staffing and administrative resources to support apprentices in the same way as larger firms. It is more difficult for the smallest businesses to bear the initial costs of taking on an apprentice. Targeted financial support is therefore needed for small and micro businesses during the initial period of an apprenticeship to ensure a successful outcome.

There is a role for Welsh Government to promote and encourage other sources of support for businesses in taking on apprentices. Trade bodies such as [ECA](#), offer employment and skills helplines and guidance.

Reaching SMEs, and in particular micro businesses, can be difficult for government. ECA is setting up regional Education and Training Careers Alliances (ETCAs) as mechanisms for engaging wider industry, including micro and sole trader electrical businesses, with policy makers and training providers. Plans are already in train to roll out ETCAs in Cardiff Capital Region and North Wales.

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

Feedback from employers about the role of schools and careers services in promoting trades and apprenticeships tells a sad story. There appears to be a lack of interest in promoting apprenticeships; a higher value is placed on knowledge based tertiary education, rather than vocational training.

These institutions are not strategically aligned to working with small businesses. When they do invite small businesses into schools, they tend to mix them up with larger more 'glamorous' businesses, which prevents learners comparing like with like.

Time is a precious resource for small businesses; events where they are not given a fair showing puts them off engaging in the future. In the same vein, invitations to events sent at short notice (often less than a week) preclude small businesses where the whole team is out on a job and cannot, without planning, spare someone to attend.

ECA is keen to promote the value of electrical apprenticeships as a route to a secure and well paid career. One of the purposes of the regional ETCAs we are setting up in Wales is to improve local careers advice and links between industry and schools. We hope this will be a natural conduit for promoting apprenticeships in our sector.

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.

As an industry, we recognise that current informal SME recruitment practices can put barriers in way of improving gender and ethnic diversity, which also increases chances of bad recruitment choices and early drop outs.

We recognise that gender and diversity stereotypes need addressing at an early age. Children as young as primary age are already forming ideas about future jobs. Early years curriculum interventions would help create a fundamental shift in apprenticeship diversity.

For women to flourish in the trades, interventions such as obligatory provision of female sized work clothes and equipment, along with single sex changing areas would send out a strong message of commitment to tackling gender equality in the workplace in Wales.

Greater engagement with industry and education is needed to develop and promote more objective and inclusive recruitment practices. ECA is developing guidance and training for small businesses to promote ways to increase apprentice diversity.

Peripatetic industries like ours need clarity about the rule of apprentices needing to work at least 51% of their time from Wales. This is a particular issue for firms in North

Wales, where much of their work and pool of potential apprentices are situated in the North West of England. This means sometimes apprentice places go unfilled in Welsh firms.

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.

ECA recognises the clear vision and commitment Welsh Government has towards achieving more electrical apprentices, for example through the Net Zero Skills Action Plan. We welcome the openness of Welsh Government, Medr, Qualification Wales and Regional Skills Partnerships to discussion and exploring ways of improving the skills system. To overcome the obstacles noted, it is vital to keep open these channels of communication.

We recognise the role procurement can play in supporting and increasing apprenticeships. Social value requirements in Wales generally remain weak and ineffective. Ambitious skills development targets need to be set through closer engagement between policy makers and the industries (like ours) that are actually going to deliver them (rather than intermediaries or 'experts' employed by external consultants).

We need a more flexible approach to the funding of apprenticeships and other training courses. Where necessary, this may mean breaking the college monopoly on funding and dealing direct with independent training providers, which as well as delivering more and higher quality training in some fields could also provide a cost saving to the public purse.

Wales needs more qualified electricians. To address the electrical skills gap in Wales, we need to measure and improve the current rate of progression from Level 2 Progression learners to Level 3.

If necessary, a proportion of public financing should be diverted away from classroom-based Foundation and Progression courses towards apprenticeship programmes that can deliver level 3 qualified electricians suitable for employment in businesses that are furthering the strategic and economic aims of the Welsh Government.