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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP34

Evidence from: School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University



Apprenticeship Pathways

Evidence Submission February 2025

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This submission draws on recent research relevant to the consultation, focused on skills and training in food production:

- Exploration of [good practice in delivering accredited training](#) in agro-ecological farming found that providers have adapted their provision to meet demand for specialist learning, but it has often been dependent on short-term project funding. Offering apprenticeships remains financially challenging for food growers in Wales particularly given the seasonality of their workloads and their scale of operation.
- Research into how to meet [knowledge requirements for future food](#) supply chains, focusing on UK horticultural production, found that knowledge systems have been weakened by the economic vulnerability of growers, and sustained under-investment in training and research infrastructure. In turn this makes careers in the sector less appealing, deterring potential trainees.
- Investigation of how [Welsh livestock farmers](#) might be enabled to move into horticultural production which found that with appropriate support and training more mixed farming is an option.
- Evaluation of the [Future Farmer Training Programme](#) in Wales 2021-23 which piloted new entrants access to training in agro-ecological farming and horticulture found the network addressed needs of trainers and trainees.

1. Economy and skills gaps

A **resilient Welsh food system** depends on well-rewarded careers in agriculture and horticulture. A clear, ambitious strategy for expanding domestic food growing can play an important role in Wales' net-zero economy. Projects such as [Welsh Veg in Schools](#) demonstrate the potential for Welsh growers to produce more of the fresh produce eaten in Wales, contributing to multiple well-being goals. Such expansion requires an adequately skilled workforce, making training and education in agriculture and horticulture a public good deserving support.

Difficulties recruiting experienced workers are apparent across types of grower and job types, in part because of lack of provision of specialist horticultural education programmes across the UK (Pitt 2022). Whilst many sectors experience recruitment

challenges and skills gaps, horticulture is different due to the seasonality of work, unpredictability of growing crops, and product perishability.

Data on the state of the land-based workforce and training provision is inadequate, meaning we do not fully understand this sector's skills gaps, projected trends or training needs ([Miller Research 2022](#)). National data collection and forecasting is required as the basis for future investment and training provision. Workers in agriculture and horticulture draw on wide-ranging complex skills, often developed through experience rather than formal education. This makes it difficult to assess and monitor skills levels in the sector, with experiential learning often discounted in data. There is a need for a coordinated approach to monitoring this and evaluating whether provision is able to meet current and projected demand.

At present it is difficult to make a viable income as a food grower, particularly when producing to agro-ecological principles ([Pitt 2022](#)). Yet those working in the sector are currently providing essential education to new recruits, and volunteer their time to train new-entrants and develop training opportunities. Government can support the sector and ensure thriving knowledge exchange by recognizing and rewarding the value of this learning and supporting growers to develop their skills as educators, for example through train-the-trainer initiatives. This will help underpin the viability of their farm business and enhance the sector's capacity to provide educational opportunities.

2. Pathways into and through apprenticeships

Training opportunities in food growing, particularly agro-ecological growing including organic have been disconnected from routes such as apprenticeships, being more often provided by small farms or enterprises, including community run growing. The sector has worked to fill gaps in provision through project-funded programmes, and voluntary learning opportunities. Those who host on-farm trainees have accessed support like Kick Start, but understanding of how to connect to other educational routes such as apprenticeships is limited.

There are a significant number of adults interested in entering land-based careers following a period in work or higher education in unrelated fields. Such career-change entrants involved in the Future Farmer Training reported that it is difficult to identify opportunities to access education in agro-ecological horticulture as there are multiple, often informal, pathways in. There is no single portal to discover these opportunities. Trainees also reported that there is a lack of development opportunities to support them beyond entry level training, meaning they struggle to move into more advanced roles.

Organisations including Landworkers Alliance are working to address these issues, and have recently launched a [pilot apprenticeship programme](#) in partnership with Coleg Cambria. This is a welcome contribution to the educational landscape.

2. Employers

Wales has a strong community of agro-ecological growers and networks of organisations working to support trainees and trainers. This provides a valuable peer-support system and routes for exchanging good practice. But this support system is informal, relying on the time of people who are frequently overworked and financially precarious. Investing in organisations and experts who hold vital expertise will help ensure they can train future generations of food producers.

Conversations with food growers revealed that they often did not understand how apprenticeships function, and had misconceptions about their operation. For example, some assumed that they needed a qualification in their field to be able to train apprentices. Once better informed about employing apprentices they had concerns about the viability for their business:

- seasonal workloads make it difficult to provide sufficient work for trainees during winter,
- fluctuating and low income levels make it challenging for growers to pay apprentices year round,
- growers are often in rural locations where housing and transport costs are high, and can be unaffordable for those on an apprenticeship income.

Suggested solutions to address these barriers include partnerships between employers enabling them to share apprentices. Support such as the financial assistance to employers which was provided via Kick Start is also highly beneficial. Given the profile of those entering this sector as trainees, such support needs to be available without age limits for those taking up apprenticeships.

3. Equity and access for learners

Financial constraints and the concentration of food production training opportunities in rural areas has resulted in a lack of diversity amongst trainees. Given the high proportion of career changers seeking training in this sector, learners are more likely to have caring responsibilities and other financial commitments. Such new entrants reported that they could not take up an apprenticeship as the income is insufficient to meet their costs of living.

The location of traineeships is also a limitation as they often require trainees to move to remote rural settings where affordable housing is highly limited. Plus the trainee is relocating for the duration of a traineeship which is disruptive and incurs expenses.

Opportunities in rural areas also present barriers to people of colour or minoritised genders who do not always feel welcomed there.

References

Miller Research 2022 Mapping of existing horticulture training provision (and current sector requirements)

https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/mapping_of_existing_horticulture_training_provision.pdf

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