

Senedd Cymru

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig

Ymchwiliad: Llwybrau prentisiaeth

Cyf: AP35

Ymateb gan: ColegauCymru

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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP35

Evidence from: CollegesWales



The Senedd Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee -
Inquiry into Apprenticeship Pathways

Colegau Cymru response

7 February 2025

Introduction

Colegau Cymru is an education charity, and we promote the public benefit of post-compulsory education and training in Wales. As the representative organisation of all colleges in Wales, we feel well positioned to be able to outline to the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs (ETRA) Committee the Welsh further education (FE) sector's views on the pathways into apprenticeships.

Colegau Cymru agrees with the Welsh Government's view of the Apprenticeship Programme in Wales, specifically¹: "Apprenticeships are a cornerstone of our skills policy and a central commitment in our Programme for Government. Apprenticeships are a vital tool in building a stronger, fairer and more just Wales which promises economic success for all. Apprenticeships support our drive to raise skills levels, drive productivity and create more resilient communities."

Apprenticeships can have a life-changing effect:

- Lilly Phillips, Engineering Apprentice, The College Merthyr Tydfil². Lilly joined the College from a local High School to study BTEC Level 3 Engineering. Lilly, who has now progressed successfully on to an apprenticeship programme at Tenneco-Walker. Since her apprenticeship began, Lilly's confidence has grown and now she wants to inspire other women to explore the engineering industry.
- Jodi Jones, Welding and Fabrication Apprentice, Gower College Swansea³. Following a period away from the workforce Jodi started a Level 2 Apprenticeship in Welding and Fabrication. Having completed her apprenticeship, Jodi secured a role in the college's welding and fabrication workshop, where she now supports learners undertaking their own apprenticeship. Jodi is continuing with her own education by completing a Level 3 engineering qualification.

However, the benefits associated with the overall impact of the Apprenticeship Programme in Wales are at risk of being lessened. Reductions to the apprenticeship budget could significantly impact both on individuals and employers. Analysis by the Centre for Economics and Business Research⁴ shows the far-reaching economic and social consequences of apprenticeship funding cuts in recent years. As a result of the circa 14% budget reduction, partly because of the loss of EU funding streams, the report highlighted:

- 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 are being impacted the most
- Funding cuts are disproportionately affecting the most deprived within the Welsh population.

¹ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2024/2/2/1709036523/apprenticeships-policy-statement.pdf>

² <https://www.colleges.wales/en/blog/post/celebrating-young-women-in-stem-subjects-on-international-women-s-day-2024>

³ <https://www.colleges.wales/image/documents/Girls%20and%20STEM/Jodi%20Jones.png>

⁴ <https://www.colleges.wales/en/blog/post/sustained-investment-for-apprenticeships-and-further-education-vital-ahead-of-extremely-difficult-budget-announcement>

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 are significant challenges in mapping out career routes through the different apprenticeship levels. These challenges include, but are not limited to, inconsistent terminology within the apprenticeships offer, incoherent categorisations of occupational sectors, and qualification content within apprenticeships at Level 3 and above, which sometimes focuses on management competency, as opposed to technical/craft/occupational competency.

Within the narrative around apprenticeships, reference is made to ‘apprenticeship sectors’, apprenticeship frameworks’ and ‘apprenticeship pathways’ often inter-changeably. This only serves to complicate what is an already difficult landscape to navigate. In more ‘academic pathways’ the journey that an individual needs to take is very clear i.e. GCSEs, onto A Levels, and then undergraduate courses or into jobs. However, for vocational routes, including apprenticeships, there are a limited number of clear pathways but there are few whereby an individual can start their career via a Junior Apprenticeship, and progress within that chosen career to a Degree Apprenticeship (at least in a non-linear way and not solely following an apprenticeship). A Construction learner for example, could engage with that sector via a Junior Apprenticeship offer, but the journey to a Degree Apprenticeship within the same occupational sector, would involve the learner needing to go to college for one year full-time, as there is no longer a Level 2 Foundation Apprenticeship in Construction available.

In reference to the point above, changes to the qualification system can have an unintended consequence on the availability of an ‘apprenticeship pathway’. Recent changes to the qualifications within the construction sector have limited the choices of many individuals, mainly young white males from deprived socio-economic backgrounds. Although ColegauCymru is working with colleagues from Medr, Qualifications Wales, and the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) to resolve these unintended consequences, analysis undertaken by ColegauCymru in 2023, indicated that there were potentially 506 individuals who decided not to enter the construction and building services engineering sectors, as a result of the removal of a Level 2 Foundation Apprenticeship.

It is important that the Welsh Government and Medr work collaboratively with other stakeholders to simplify the language and produce visual representation of the journey that an individual can take. This work would need to be done on an ongoing basis, through Medr’s planned reviews of the 23 ‘apprenticeship sectors’. This is a key part of improving advice and guidance⁵ for young people.

There are many routes to/through an apprenticeship, which can be difficult to explain to those outside of the apprenticeships sector. However, if existing approaches and programmes are formalised and sustained under an overarching Vocation Education and Training (VET) Strategy, it would be possible to map these ‘pathways’ out, so that they can be promoted accordingly i.e. a VET Strategy which has regard to the Young Persons Guarantee, Jobs Growth Wales Plus, and Apprenticeships. That said, these ‘pathways’ will continually evolve, so this mapping must be an ongoing endeavor.

⁵ [Review of vocational qualifications in Wales: report | GOV.WALES](#)

ColegauCymru continues to advocate strongly for the Welsh Government to develop a VET Strategy for Wales, which should include a coherent 14 – 19 offer. A recommendation made by the Welsh Government’s Vocational Qualifications Review, as well as a comprehensive review of the Finnish VET model, following a ColegauCymru visit funded by Taith. This is critical to bring together VET with Wales’ economic and industrial priorities, meeting the needs of both learners and employers. The Finnish VET model is characterised by six principles, which the Welsh Government should give due consideration to:

- A comprehensive and continuous system
- Contemporary data and analysis
- Clear and attractive pathways
- Choice, based on lifelong guidance
- Competence-based and flexible
- Delivered by competent and trusted providers.

Meeting the needs of young people aged 14 – 19, alongside the needs of older individuals, particularly those looking to enter or re-enter the workplace, should be a central consideration in any future VET Strategy for Wales, if we are to truly achieve parity of esteem and opportunity. As the Welsh economy develops, it is crucial that the Welsh Government sustainably funds and enables FE and apprenticeships to be flexible and work with the needs of the employers and businesses in Wales.

The importance of such a strategy would be to align everyone’s efforts towards a common goal, which would be to increase participation in, and ensure completion of, vocational qualifications and programmes, so as to meet the long-term needs of the Welsh economy. Such a strategy would send a clear signal to all key stakeholders, including learners, parents, advisers (including teachers), providers and enablers, that Wales is serious about meeting the needs of existing employers in Wales, potential inward investors (inc. for other parts of the UK) and underscore the importance of an effective skills system which underpins the economy. ColegauCymru would encourage the Welsh Government to consult on such a strategy, with a sense of urgency, ensuring as wide a view is taken, including the need to have due regard to the Welsh Government’s Economic Mission and UK Government’s proposed Industrial Strategy. Any VET Strategy must underpin any economic strategy and must have a timeline that transitions political terms.

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

Key to a successful apprenticeships programme is of course employers recruiting apprentices. Apprenticeship providers report that they are finding it increasingly difficult to meet employer demand, which is further exacerbated by the decreasing budget. Given these factors it is reasonable to assume that the apprenticeship pathways delivered do support the needs of Welsh business.

The most recent Welsh Government evaluation of the Apprenticeship Programme⁶ employers using apprenticeships were generally very satisfied with the content of [apprenticeship pathways]. While 76% were satisfied, only 5% were dissatisfied. This indicates that, generally, [apprenticeship pathways] are

⁶ <https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-apprenticeships-programme-final-report>

keeping pace with the requirements of [employers who are currently using the Apprenticeship Programme]. Most apprentices [...] agreed with this view; none raised concerns about content irrelevant to their job, although a minority were dissatisfied regarding the inclusion of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in the apprenticeship.

However, apprenticeship providers recognise that the existing apprenticeship pathways offer could be more effective, if the funding mechanism could be amended, to allow providers to deliver these pathways in a more time-efficient way. Currently, apprenticeship providers are financially penalised if they deliver an apprenticeship in less than 80% of an arbitrary ‘expected duration of funding’ measure. This means some apprentices who wish to make progress through their apprenticeship quicker than their peers, or businesses who support their apprentices more, could be disadvantaged. Regardless of the timescale over which an apprenticeship is delivered, the provider input remains the same. Colegau Cymru asks that the Committee requests that the Welsh Government and/or Medr look at this arbitrary mechanism as a matter of urgency, so that the overall apprenticeship offer can be more responsive to the needs of employers and apprentices in Wales.

Medr’s forthcoming apprenticeship sector reviews are a positive step in addressing some apprenticeship frameworks which contain out-of-date content. It should be noted that within all these 23 Apprenticeship ‘Sectors’ there are numerous distinct apprenticeships frameworks and/or apprenticeship pathways, each linked to specific occupational role. Within each of these apprenticeship frameworks and/or apprenticeship pathways there is a further layer of multiple qualifications.

Further, all reviews should look at what additional ‘bite-sized’ qualifications should be delivered as part of the overall apprenticeship framework, so that apprentices are gaining ‘in-demand’ qualifications, as part of their overall programme. Previously Personal Learning Account (PLA) funding has been available for learners to undertake this additionality, but this opportunity has now been withdrawn by Medr.

Welsh language skills are crucial for many businesses across Wales, especially in the Health, Social Care and Public Services sectors. Colegau Cymru encourages Medr to give due regard to ensuring that apprenticeship frameworks are available to be delivered bilingually, or through the medium of Welsh, to ensure that the Welsh language is treated no less favourably.

With each of these reviews, there are significant human resource requirements including, but not limited to relevant employers being engaged/surveyed. Each apprenticeship framework review should look at the relevance (to employers) of the qualifications therein. Each review should genuinely seek the views of employers, of whether they see the value and/or requirement of Essential Skills Wales literacy and numeracy qualifications being part of the framework.

It is important that Medr will be sufficiently resourced to undertake this work, so that the overall apprenticeship offer remains fit-for-purpose for employers and individuals alike. Where employer panels are established to review the apprenticeship frameworks, and qualifications therein, across all of the 23 apprenticeship sectors, they should do so in collaboration with the apprenticeship provider network, to ensure that these employer panels are truly representative of the users of said frameworks.

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.

Colleges are pivotal in preparing apprentices to meet the needs of employers, supporting the Welsh Government's aim to align workforce skills with high-demand industries. Colleges develop and deliver specialised courses in renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, and creative fields, equipping learners with practical, market-aligned skills. Colleges have strong partnerships with local, national and international employers across a range of industries and offer targeted work experience and qualifications, alongside apprenticeships. This offer provides individuals with hands-on experience and ensures that training is industry-aligned, fostering employment opportunities in growing sectors. The Employer Skills Survey 2022⁷, which surveyed 4,825 employers across Wales, outlines that the overall proportion of employers offering apprenticeships in Wales is growing (17% in 2022, up from 16% in 2019, which itself was up from 15% in 2016). However, of the employers surveyed in 2022, only 9% at the time were employing apprentices.

Although this is a positive trend, Wales does need more employers engaging with and ultimately employing apprentices. This will only be addressed by a sustained Welsh Government-funded communications and marketing campaign, like we have seen before, aimed at employers and encouraging them to use the Apprenticeship Programme to recruit and/or up-skill those members of their workforce who are 'new to role'.

In terms of an employer incentive scheme, there are mixed views amongst apprenticeship providers, with most indicating that any funding available should be directed towards meeting existing employer demand, as this is becoming increasingly challenging because of reducing budgets, increased provision costs, and apprenticeships now taking longer to deliver than before. However, all providers recognise that employers are finding it increasingly difficult to justify the recruitment of an apprentice(s) given the increases in employment and business costs. Should funding be made available for an employer incentive scheme, from outside of the existing apprenticeships budget, then any approach to an employer incentive must be co-produced with the apprenticeship provider network, as previous iterations have been overly bureaucratic for both employer and provider. Further, any employer incentive must be targeted to achieve the greatest effect.

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

Based on a five-year trend, from 2019 to 2023 inclusive, the Careers Wales Pupils Destination data⁸ shows that just 2% (avg. 675) of school leavers at Year 11 across Wales go on to do an apprenticeship each year. This is a clear indication that the level of understanding around apprenticeship pathways is low amongst pre-16 learners. It should be noted that within the pupil destination surveys used, reference is made to 'Work-based Training – Employed Status', which we can only use as a proxy for 'an apprenticeship' so the

⁷ <https://www.gov.wales/employer-skills-survey-2022-wales-report>

⁸ <https://careerswales.gov.wales/education-and-teaching-professionals/pupil-destinations>

figures above may be lower. It is important that Careers Wales ensures that the data collected during pupil destination surveys is amended to request information on progression onto an 'apprenticeship'.

The key issue which is raised by apprenticeship providers is the lack of schools' engagement (particularly schools with 11 – 18 provision). It is felt that the issue extends to raising the awareness of teachers and parents, as well as pupils. There is a definite need to educate all involved in the school community - pupils, teachers, parents etc. - around the routes to an apprenticeship. There is an opportunity now to capitalise on the developments within the new curriculum, including the opportunity to engage with pupils in primary schools. It has also been suggested that information on apprenticeships and other post-16 opportunities needs to be part of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curriculum.

The issue outlined above have also been highlighted in both the Transitions to Employment Report⁹ by Dr. Hefin David MS and the Welsh Government's Review of Vocational Qualifications¹⁰ led by Sharron Lusher MBE DL. Both reports recommend enhancing collaboration between schools and colleges and providing colleges with greater access to school pupils. This would ensure that learners can make well-informed decisions about their futures early in their educational journey. ColegauCymru believes that there has not been sufficient urgency in addressing these recommendations from both reports, and they should be prioritised by the Welsh Government and the pre- and post-16 education sectors. ColegauCymru believes that the marketing of the apprenticeship offer is key, and that there needs to be a sustained campaign aimed at school pupils, their parents, and school leavers. It is felt that best practice with these campaigns would be underpinned by an apprentice ambassadorial programme¹¹. We also recognise that 'Apprenticeships Week' and 'Apprenticeship Awards Cymru' are key, but the sector needs to establish a narrative around 'graduating' from an apprenticeship.

As an example of good practice, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Apprenticeship Ambassador Scheme¹² promotes Welsh medium and bilingual apprenticeships. The ambassadors attend events, visit schools, write blogs and participate in interviews to highlight the benefits of Welsh medium apprenticeships. In addition to promoting apprenticeships, the ambassadors develop skills in public speaking, presentation and digital skills, enhancing their own employability. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol provides training and resources to help them effectively promote Welsh medium apprenticeships. This scheme also supports the aspiration of reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050. We urge the Committee to consider the benefits of introducing such a scheme, drawing on the best practice of the Coleg.

Estyn's 2022 report on careers advice and guidance for 14-16-year-olds¹³ highlights the critical need for comprehensive and impartial advice regarding apprenticeships. The report underscores the pivotal role of Careers Wales advisers in providing independent professional careers information, advice and guidance, aiding school children to explore various career pathways, including apprenticeships. The report emphasises the necessity for well-prepared advisers who can offer clear and realistic advice, effectively challenging any misconceptions school children may have. Furthermore, Estyn stresses the importance of

⁹ <https://www.gov.wales/transitions-employment-report>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.wales/review-vocational-qualifications-wales-report>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.wales/apprenticeships-genius-decision/megans-story>

¹² <https://colegcymraeg.ac.uk/en/students/apprenticeships/>

¹³ <https://estyn.gov.wales/improvement-resources/impartial-careers-advice-and-guidance-to-young-people-aged-14-16-years-provided-by-careers-wales-advisers/>

directing support to those most in need, ensuring that all students receive the necessary information and encouragement to consider apprenticeships as a viable option.

It is important that school monitoring on the destination of all pupils leaving school includes publicly available data on how many individuals progress onto an apprenticeship. Further, it is critical that schools promote apprenticeships and other post-16 vocational options alongside universities during their 'progressions' events. Colegau Cymru believes there is scope for Estyn to include lines of investigation and questions within their Common Inspection Framework, on the steps schools are taking to inform their pupils of the whole array of options post-16, including apprenticeships. Further, schools should be actively encouraged to publish data on their websites showing progression onto the whole array of post 16 options, including apprenticeships, and not data that is limited to access to higher education.

Notwithstanding the above, good practice does exist between schools, colleges and employers, although not on a Wales-wide basis. One example is the Junior Apprenticeships offer at Cardiff and Vale College which has seen high success rates with an average of 86 - 88% of learners achieving vocational qualifications and GCSEs, and the majority have progressed on to FE or employment. Independent research commissioned by Cardiff and Vale College and undertaken by Dr Steven Garner from Swansea University has also found that the programme will save the Welsh and UK governments an absolute minimum of £556,700.00 per person in preventative spend over the course of a 40-year working life and 60-year adult life, in addition to providing numerous additional benefits to learners. Estyn's Review of the Junior Apprenticeship Programme in Wales¹⁴ found that earlier pathways for 14-19 improved levels of engagement and attendance, high success rates in vocational qualifications offered and strong progression rates into further education and training.

Further to the west of Wales, Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg Ceredigion have approximately 900 learners aged 14-16 from schools across Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion who study with them for between two and four hours a week. The delivery model is co-produced between the colleges and the schools, which sees some schools send their pupils to the college, where others invite college staff into the school to deliver vocational provision - in Llanelli there is a vocational centre on one of the schools, where college staff deliver the construction component. In the north east, Coleg Cambria delivers a Youth Access programme, which sees school pupils join a full vocational programme for two or three days a week. The other days they are in school picking up the statutory requirements of pre-16 education. However, programmes at colleges with large numbers of learners are consistently oversubscribed, and learners in many areas of Wales do not have similar opportunities because there are no collaborative local arrangements in place within their areas to support the delivery of 14-16 programmes.

Colegau Cymru believes there are huge benefits for schools working collaboratively with colleges and local authorities, to explore opportunities for developing or extending 14-16 programmes for all learners, to broaden their curriculum offer in the best interests of learners.

In relation to 'meaningful work experience' if we wish to expose school children to the world of work around them, and the skills that are needed to succeed within it, we must go beyond the view that one five day 'work-experience week' in Year 10 (which is not universally achievable) is all that we can/should do. We must leverage the opportunities that are presented by existing and future approaches i.e. scale up

¹⁴ <https://estyn.gov.wales/improvement-resources/a-review-of-the-junior-apprenticeship-programme-in-wales/>

the Careers Wales Education and Business Partnership, encourage and promote more school-focused employer fairs, re-introduce the 'Have-a-go' Programme, and ensure that employers are involved in the delivery of the new VCSEs etc.). It is recognised that all of this will require increased investment, but this will surely be offset by the 'missed opportunity costs' of young people who might otherwise choose the an unsuitable option for them. There are roles here for a range of stakeholders, including Careers Wales, Qualifications Wales, and Estyn, in ensuring meaningful experience of the world of work is factored into their remits, in a variety of ways, and formalised in the expected VET Strategy for Wales.

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.

Given that an apprenticeship pathway is linked to actual job, then there will be inherent local and regional differences across Wales, given the economies and employment opportunities are different e.g. the opportunities to undertake an engineering (aerospace) apprenticeship would be limited in west Wales, if an individual was not prepared to travel or move location.

There are a range of reasons why learners may choose to withdraw from an apprenticeship. In the latest published data on 'Learner Outcomes' for apprentices¹⁵, for the academic year 2022/23, the reasons for (4,955) individuals withdrawing from their apprenticeship programme early are as follows:

'Failure'	56%	2,795
Gone into employment	15%	735
Not applicable	12%	595
Personal reasons	11%	535
Health	5%	225
Financial reasons	0.5%	25
Exclusion / left in bad standing	1%	45
Total		4,995

Cost-of-living (including the costs associated with transport, particularly in rural areas) is an issue, especially with the National Apprenticeship Minimum Wage (NAMW), set by the UK Government, currently at £6.40 per hour, rising to £7.55 in April 2025, which is the same as under 18s, compared to the National Minimum Wage (for those under 21) being set currently at £8.60, rising to £10.00 in April 2025 (Note, any apprentice, regardless of age, is only eligible for the NAMW for the first year of the apprenticeship.)

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/learner-outcome-measures-for-apprenticeships-and-adult-learning-august-2022-july-2023>

Current rates

These rates are for the National Living Wage (for those aged 21 and over) and the National Minimum Wage (for those of at least school leaving age). The rates change on 1 April every year.

	21 and over	18 to 20	Under 18	Apprentice
April 2024 (current rate)	£11.44	£8.60	£6.40	£6.40
April 2025	£12.21	£10.00	£7.55	£7.55

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In trial data¹⁷, the Welsh Government established that in the 2021/22 academic year, learners who earned less were less likely to successfully complete their apprenticeship, with the largest drop in success rates between 2018/19 and 2021/22 observed among those earning less than £15,000. Before the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis, success rates were similar across all earnings levels. The lower success rates for low-earning apprentices could not be fully explained by the type of apprenticeship or learner demographics, and those living in deprived neighbourhoods had even lower success rates compared to their counterparts in less deprived areas. This evidence suggests that the cost of living was a significant factor in the reduced completion rates for apprenticeships in 2021/22.

Concerns about the NAMW are regularly raised by apprenticeship providers. It is recognised that setting the rate is outside the control of the Welsh Government, but more could possibly be done through its 'Fair Work' agenda and the 'Economic Contract' with employers. It has been suggested that the Welsh Government could do more to influence employers to improve their offer to apprentices, including a guarantee for 'off-the-job' training, through reviewing the Apprenticeships Agreement. Within the constraints of personal tax liabilities, it was suggested that the Welsh Government should explore the introduction of bursaries and/or incentives.

Learners should also be able to complete their qualifications earlier if they demonstrate competence. Reducing the funding to 80% for early completion is unfair as there often needs to be greater input in a shorter period from the provider. The Finnish model¹⁸ was interesting to observe where duration on a training programme was not timebound, but occupational competence bound.

Raising the profile of apprenticeships with groups who have particular protected characteristics and are often under-represented in the Apprenticeship Programme is key, as providers find it difficult to attract a diverse range of applicants for employers. It has been suggested that there should be an active campaign to highlight the recruitment of apprentices who are disabled and/or from minority backgrounds.

¹⁶ [National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates)

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.wales/apprenticeship-outcomes-earnings-august-2021-july-2022-html>

¹⁸ [Wales learning from Finland - Strategies for Moving Freely: The Finnish Approach to Vocational Education and Training](#)

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

In relation to the Welsh Government's Policy Statement on Apprenticeships, Colegau Cymru broadly agrees with its overarching objectives of building resilience and sustainability, addressing skills shortages and being inclusive. However, there does need to be debate around the fact that apprenticeships cannot be the answer to all our economic challenges, especially within the context of a reducing budget. The Policy Statement refers to several other Welsh Government policies and plans that apprenticeships play an important part in delivering. The Apprenticeship Programme is noted as being a key part in addressing:

- Welsh Government's net zero ambitions (through the Net Zero Skills Action Plan),
- Helping to grow the Foundational Economy
- Digital and Advanced Engineering
- Supporting priority industries (e.g. advanced manufacturing, cyber security)
- Developing the Welsh language skills of apprentices.

All of this with the pressure of a declining budget when apprenticeship providers have increasing costs of delivery. The primary goal of an Apprenticeship Programme should be to focus on developing occupational competence.

The Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) impact on the planning for tertiary education provision in several ways. The RSPs identify and publish the regional priority sectors, and we as apprenticeship providers, rightly pay due regard to them when planning provision. However, one of the challenges that the RSPs have is getting industry to feedback to their surveys as so many are micro and SME businesses.

As Medr continues to develop its apprenticeships work, it is important to guard against any potential for duplication between its own, and the Welsh Government's apprenticeships teams.

Beyond Wales, it is clear that developments led by the UK Government can have either a direct or indirect impact on the economy here in Wales, and therefore the skills requirements that are needed to support it, through the rollout of the UK Industrial Strategy. In our response to the Green Paper, we outlined the following:

"Enhancing awareness and understanding of the jobs and career opportunities in the growth-driving sectors of the economy of the future must begin prior to learners reaching the post compulsory education settings. Professional and impartial careers information, advice, and guidance is critical and must ensure that learners understand the totality of opportunities available and the relevant pathways, for example, providing them with a roadmap illustrating the skills required to enter a specific sector.

Greater investment in high-quality vocational education and training (inc. apprenticeships and modularised short courses) is key. Apprenticeships help to futureproof, motivate and diversify the

workforce – offering people the chance to gain high-quality vocational skills through assessable and high-quality opportunities. Responding to the skills shortages and gaps in the eight high-growth sectors will be critical to drive productivity and economic growth.

[We need to] build on the strong partnerships that exist between industry and educational institutions to create specific training programmes and tailored apprenticeship routes which would improve the chance of a steady pipeline of talent, aligned to sector needs, encouraging employers to commit to sustained investment in training. Additional UK Government or Welsh Government training or skills development funding working in conjunction with Regional Skills Partnerships would also foster growth in training investment through colleges.

It is critical that the UK Government prioritises greater cross-governmental collaboration, recognising the underpinning role that the Devolved Administrations play particularly in education, and economic development. Regular inter-governmental meetings and joint initiatives can help avoid duplication and align goals.”

There are a range of cross overs in our response to the UK Government consultation on a UK Industrial Strategy and to this inquiry. This serves to demonstrate that ColegauCymru, along with others, see apprenticeships as critical to the success of any economic policy, and that without a coherent, well-understood, appealing, and sustainably funded apprenticeships programme, the economic aspiration of any government will not be achieved.

Summary of ColegauCymru’s written response to the Inquiry

Apprenticeships are crucial for building a stronger, fairer and more just Wales by raising skill levels, driving productivity, and creating resilient communities. However, recent reductions in the apprenticeship budget, partly due to the loss of EU funding, have led to nearly 6,000 fewer apprenticeship starts and a significant economic impact, particularly in the health, social care, and construction sectors. There are significant challenges in mapping career routes through different apprenticeship levels due to inconsistent terminology, incoherent sector categorisations, and a focus on management competency over technical skills. A VET Strategy for Wales would help to align vocational education with economic and industrial priorities.

Employer engagement is critical in apprenticeship pathways, but more support is needed for SMEs. A sustained communications campaign and potential employer incentives could enhance engagement. Additionally, barriers such as transport costs and low wages affect apprenticeship completion rates, particularly for those from deprived areas. Raising the profile of apprenticeships is essential. Finally, the Welsh Government should develop policies that support apprenticeship pathways, ensuring they meet the needs of the Welsh economy and address skills gaps. Strategic investment and collaboration are necessary to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of apprenticeship pathways in Wales.

ColegauCymru is a key partner in the development of the Apprenticeships Programme and will continue to support Welsh Government and Medr officials with this work.

Further information

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