

Enterprise and Business Committee

APP15

Inquiry into Apprenticeships

Evidence from Asset Skills

Asset Skills

Enterprise and Business Committee Inquiry into Apprenticeships in Wales

Asset Skills is the Sector Skills Council for facilities management, housing, property, planning, cleaning and parking. We are led by employers to improve the skills of the workforce, which in turn raises performance, productivity and competitiveness. We work with business, public and professional bodies and learning providers to ensure the training employers need is available to meet their current and future skills requirements.

Asset Skills welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's remit of establishing if the current apprenticeship system providing effective support to the Welsh economy and meeting the current and future skills needs of employers in Wales? In particular you are seeking feedback on how attractive apprenticeships are to 16-24 year olds and on how effective the current systems for establishing Apprenticeship Standards and Frameworks and recruiting apprentices really are.

We respond to your Key Issues as follows:

How effective is employer involvement in the apprenticeship system in Wales? Has this changed as a result of the current economic circumstances? Are employers able to find sufficient numbers of young people with the skills and aptitudes that they require? Do relationships between employers and training providers work effectively? Are apprenticeships still limited to certain sectors?

Employers are engaged at all stages of the apprenticeship process including input to the National Occupational Standards and qualifications derived from them which in turn make up the building blocks of any Apprenticeship Framework. Taking on an apprentice provides employers with an opportunity to shape their competence to meet business objectives and ensure that they make a contribution to the bottom line. In times of high recruitment costs this is an excellent way of selecting and shaping an highly efficient workforce at a time when many employers feel the education system is not providing them with young people with the right skills and aptitudes. In particular, apprenticeships help develop the employability and broader intellectual skills required for smart working in the future. Relationships between employers and training providers vary depending upon the level of commitment and interest shown by employers in maximising workplace learning opportunities. Where "traditional" models of delivery encourage a split between workplace and off-station learning and where training providers fail to evaluate learning opportunities in the workplace – then relationships can be strained and the quality of the apprenticeship experience is diminished. We would strongly argue that a crucial part of the contract between employers and training provider is the conducting of a workplace learning audit and the integration of workplace procedures and documentation in the learning programme. Whilst the number and range of apprenticeships have increased greatly, there are still sectoral differences in both coverage and relevance. Much depends upon creating a culture in which apprenticeships are seen as a vital and major route into every sector and this requires clear career pathways and strong employer endorsement of the apprenticeship route to employment.

Do social enterprises make effective use of apprentices?

At present they do not as there is often no tradition of apprenticeships in some sectors as well as the fact that job roles in social enterprise contexts do not always fit neatly into traditional occupational categories. The more disparate the function of social enterprise organisations, the less likely they are to engage with apprenticeships. There is also the issue of the size of many social enterprise organisations and the need to make up a viable cohort of learners to make apprenticeships work effectively. A related issue is the particular way that social enterprise organisations see apprenticeships. In housing, for example, many Housing Associations see apprenticeships as a key component of their engagement with the local community,

recruiting apprentices from the community and developing community-related skills. In such cases some of the entry requirements and demands of apprenticeship frameworks can impede this process and they would argue for greater flexibility in “interpreting” such requirements. The more rigid and demanding the requirements the less likely that social enterprises will be able to fully engage with the apprenticeship offer.

Has the number of apprentices employed by local authorities, and the public sector generally, increased or decreased? Should the public sector be recruiting more apprentices?

We have no specific information on changes in the number of apprentices. We believe that the public sector should be a key participant in apprenticeships, especially as the disciplines involved in the public sector can make full use of the occupational sectors covered by apprenticeships rather than contemplating creating a public sector apprenticeship in its own right.

The Welsh Government is encouraging Community Benefits clauses in public sector contracts which can be used to promote the employment of trainees and apprenticeships. Is this an effective mechanism for increasing the numbers of apprentices?

We believe that procurement requirements can play a vital role in enhancing the uptake of apprenticeships, especially if focused on community-related outcomes. As major purchasers of services, public sector contract holders can exercise powerful leverage in this area.

What is the average profile of an apprentice, for example age, gender, employment sector? Is this profile changing and, if yes, what are the reasons for this? The National Training Federation for Wales reports that the average age for an apprentice is 26. What are the reasons for this? Are apprenticeships generally successful from the perspective of the apprentice? Have apprenticeship completion rates changed in recent years? In practice, are apprentices guaranteed a job at the end of the apprenticeship?

There is probably no clear average profile even by sector as much depends on the funding levers that are applied – at the moment particularly aimed at the 16-20 age range. In the cleaning sector for example the average age will be much higher because of the nature of the workforce. Similarly in Facilities Management apprentices will be older as people often enter the sector from other careers. Whilst understanding the financial pressures forcing a heavy concentration on young people we believe that employer’s best interests will be served by supporting older apprentices.

Do Careers Wales and Jobcentre Plus provide effective support for people wanting to find apprenticeships? Does the new Apprenticeship Matching Service, run by Careers Wales, work effectively?

We have no specific information on the effectiveness of the current matching service.

Why do young people decide to be apprentices? What factors influence their decision?

The opportunity to earn an income is an increasingly important motivation as well as the expectation of continued employment after the apprenticeship. For others the opportunity to undergo structured learning directly relevant to a vocational area remains the single biggest reason for taking up an apprenticeship as it will enhance employment prospects. Much will also depend on parental and peer pressure and perceptions about apprenticeships.

Are apprenticeships an attractive option for young people of all abilities or are apprenticeships seen as a second best option compared with higher education? Are attitudes changing and if yes, what are the reasons for this?

Apprenticeships are an attractive option for young people of all abilities but the SASW requirements are demanding, albeit more flexible than the SASE requirements in England and some learners struggle to meet them. The qualification requirements are also demanding in terms of the communication skills required over and above technical competence. Technical Certificates (where used) have often extensive knowledge components. An additional hurdle for some learners is the volume of guided learning and off-job training required. Some employers have questioned the need for those demands in certain occupational areas as they do clearly impose barriers to those with learning difficulties. If anything, the current structure favours young people with high levels of ability and the growing perception that apprenticeships are for NEETS with learning issues flies in the face of the demands of even the most basic apprenticeship. We have already touched upon the perception issue around apprenticeships among peers, parents and carers which must also be added to the mix. The success of Higher Apprenticeships

– and the ease of progression to them from other apprenticeships – will be a crucial factor in changing some of the negative impressions of apprenticeships.

Are apprenticeships fully understood by those who have most influence on the choices of young people for example parents/carers, careers teachers in schools, teachers generally? Is there too much complexity and choice of programme?

We have already addressed some of the issues around this crucial issue in earlier comments. The format and structure of apprenticeships are not easily accessible to young people and their parents and carers and are not well understood by careers teachers. This is partly due to the way in which structures are presented and the inherent difficulty of seeing an apprenticeship as an integrated learning experience rather than a qualification. Much could be done to demystify apprenticeship frameworks by taking the formal presentation and packaging them as a “programme” or even a “course”. It is also the case that the number of components within an Apprenticeship Framework can appear daunting if thought of as discrete elements rather than mutually supportive components of the overall picture.

How effective is Welsh Government policy on apprenticeships? How does its policy of apprenticeships fit into its wider economic and skills strategies?

We have no specific information to be able to respond to this question.

Education and training, including apprenticeships are devolved matters, but employment law is not. Do young people have sufficient rights and access to apprenticeship training? If not, how could the situation be improved?

The Employment Rights and Responsibilities component of an apprenticeship ensures the rights of the apprentice, regardless of sector specific components or the devolved nature of delivery. We have already touched upon certain aspects of access and opportunity in earlier responses. The SASW is to be particularly commended for its greater flexibility in acknowledging prior learning and experience and allowing apprentices to have a tailored learning experience based on what they need to know to progress. Although this makes the delivery more complex administratively, it is a powerful factor in motivating apprentices to complete their programme. While apprenticeships are expensive on the public purse, providing an entitlement for all young people to an apprenticeship place would be a powerful gesture ensuring access for all – either to a programme or employer placement.

Are the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) promoting and supporting apprenticeships effectively? How does the capacity of SSCs affect their performance in this area?

As a Sector Skills Council we see the promotion of apprenticeships as a key function. We are the primary conduit to employers to ensure that Apprenticeship Frameworks meet their needs and that they take up the apprenticeship offer. We have alluded to some of the perceived barriers to greater employer engagement in take up and see Sector Skills Councils as the primary vehicle for overcoming employer reluctance. Resource limitations are a constant problem and dedicated ring-fenced funding for apprenticeship promotion would be a welcome change to existing policy. The present regime of seeking development funding for Apprenticeship Frameworks through Universal Services bids means that some sectors do not have the apprenticeships they would like to see in place.

Is European funding being used to support apprenticeships effectively?

Are there examples of good practice apprenticeship systems in other countries that Wales can learn from?

We have no specific information to enable us to respond to these last two questions.