

Evidence to National Assembly Enterprise and Business Committee

Presented by Youth Cymru

May 16th 2012

The Organisation

Youth Cymru, formally the Welsh Association of Youth Clubs, is a voluntary organisation with over seventy five years of experience in supporting youth work and promoting the well being of young people in Wales. Based in Upper Boat we work with youth groups, youth clubs and young people across Wales. We provided training for youth workers and related professionals; accredit young people's learning through youth work with the Youth Achievement Awards Scheme; run events that bring young people from across Wales together; and work to promote understanding of the importance and contribution of youth work. Among our key aims is the promotion of a positive image of young people, and of young people's ability to participate in decision making. We were therefore very pleased to be asked to gather some evidence from young people to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry into Apprenticeships.

The Method

Focus groups and one to one discussions were held with young people in five different settings; the YMCA in central Cardiff, the Carmarthenshire Youth Action (CYCA) youth club in Llanelli, the Engage Project in Neath Port Talbot, the Garth Youth and Community Project (the Garth) in Haverfordwest and Cardiff and the Vale College, Central Cardiff campus. Time unfortunately did not permit visits to any of our partner organisations in the north. Two of the settings are open access youth clubs (CYCA and the Garth) catering for young people from a range of backgrounds, but both are in Communities First wards. The YMCA and Engage projects work with young people at risk of finding themselves not in education, training or employment. The Cardiff and the Vale College students were on access to vocational education and hairdressing access and Level 1 courses.

The young people consulted ranged in age from eleven to twenty four, with the majority being in the fifteen to eighteen age bracket. Some discussions took place in the presence of youth workers or other staff members, some with young people alone. Some staff also expressed their own views, and these have been included in the evidence, but where views were expressed by staff members rather than young people this is made clear.

The process began with a general discussion about young people's experiences in education and training, and of careers advice and guidance. This provided them with the opportunity to mention apprenticeship as an option spontaneously. When this did not occur they were then prompted by direct questions. Young people were enabled to lead the discussions to ensure as far as possible that the view expressed were genuinely their own.

Clearly, the evidence obtained in this way is by its very nature anecdotal. That said, given some of the common themes that emerged we do believe that the evidence will be of use to the Committee.

The Findings

We have grouped the findings into some broad themes that reflect some of the key issues identified in the Committee's call for evidence.

1) Awareness

Young people's awareness of apprenticeship as an option varies widely. None of the young people under fifteen spontaneously mentioned apprenticeship as an option for them in future, while most mentioned college, staying on at school, and going straight out to work. Most also mentioned university, but mainly as an option for other young people not themselves. Most had only heard the word apprentice in the context of the television programme.

With older young people the picture is more mixed, with gender and geographical variations. With the exception of the hairdressing students for all of whom apprenticeship was a choice of which they were aware, young men were more likely to have been offered apprenticeship as a possible choice than young women. Again with the exception of the hairdressing students they were also more likely to know of friends and family members who had done or were doing apprenticeships.

All the young men in the Engage project had been offered the opportunity to consider apprenticeship by careers guidance, with the exception of those whose additional learning needs would have presented too much of a barrier. In contrast, those young people in Haverfordwest who had considered or were considering apprenticeship had been made aware of the option by family and friends, and in one case a youth worker, rather than by the formal system.

“If you’re staying on at school or going to college then to Uni it’s fine. Otherwise they didn’t want to know. It’s up to you to sort yourself out.” (Young man who had left school at 16, and now at 21 is managing a shop)

The picture in Cardiff is more mixed. Many of the students in the College were very appreciative of the support they had received from Careers Wales, either through school or outside, while others felt the advice they’d received was too inflexible. Young people at the YMCA felt they had received more support from that project than they had from the official system, though it should be said that the Project does work closely with Careers Wales and other agencies.

Overall, it seems there would be value in introducing the idea of apprenticeships as an option earlier on in young people’s educational careers so that, if they favour that option they can do more to make the right choices to prepare themselves. There is a need to address the gender disparity – though not among hairdressing students – in terms of awareness. Consideration needs to be given to ensuring that apprenticeship as an option is more consistently raised with young people in communities across Wales, though it should be borne in mind that many of the young people who took part in this consultation had not had either the most consistent or happiest experiences of school and it may be that there were opportunities for advice and guidance available to them that they did not access.

2) Attitudes

Attitude to apprenticeships amongst those aware of them again varied widely. There is some confusion about what the term actually means. Some young people were clear that an apprenticeship involved structured learning, with accreditation leading to qualifications. Others viewed apprenticeship as a much more informal learning on the job process. These differences of understanding may be reflected in the way in which young people viewed apprenticeship. Some attitudes were very negative.

“It’s a rip off. They make you work really hard for rubbish money. Then when your apprenticeship’s finishes they let you go and take on another apprentice. What’s the point?” (Young woman who had family members who had experienced this type of ‘apprenticeship’)

She was by no means the only young person who expressed that view, and it was a view shared by some members of staff, to an extent.

Other young people thought it was simply not for them, either because they did not have the sorts of skills an employer looking to take on an apprentice would want, or because of preconceptions about what kind of work might offer apprenticeship as a way in.

“It’s all about plumbing and building and stuff, isn’t it? Not the kind of work I’m interested in at all.” (Young woman, 18, currently looking for work)

“Don’t you have to have loads of GCSEs? I missed a lot of school, so they wouldn’t want me, would they?” (Young man 16, not in education training or employment)

For other young people apprenticeship was a desired option, but not easy to access. Over half the hairdressing students in Cardiff said that they would have preferred an apprenticeship to learning in college, because they wanted to be earning and learning, because they felt it would suit their learning styles better, and because they believed it was more likely to lead to a job.

“Every salon has its own way of doing things. Whatever you learn in College you have to learn again to do it their way. But there aren’t many chances (for an apprenticeship) out there. And when they are they go to someone who knows someone, someone’s daughter or something.” (Young woman, 17, studying at college but actively looking for an apprenticeship)

One young man had an apprenticeship lined up for when he left school this summer. This had been organised through family connections. Two others had had apprenticeships offered to them. One was considering the option; the other had had to refuse because of transport issues. One young woman was currently doing an apprenticeship, but was unsure if she would stick at it. One young man had begun an apprenticeship but not completed it. This was because he found that he could not cope with the work, which was very physical, not because the apprenticeship system didn’t work for him. He expressed a desire to find an apprenticeship in the fields he has now chosen – retail or catering - as he enjoyed the approach of learning through doing, but believed that apprenticeship was not an option in those fields.

It may prove difficult to shift some of the negative attitudes towards apprenticeship while some employers continue to behave in the ways some young people described in this consultation. Certainly any public financial support for apprenticeship should be predicated as far as possible on the employer providing a job at the end, and on the

apprentice having their learning accredited so it is portable. Raising awareness of apprenticeship as an option with young people earlier would help dispel some of the more inaccurate preconceptions. The development and advertisement of a wider range of apprenticeship options, including in the public sector like the national youth work apprenticeship scheme, would help make apprenticeship a viable option for young people with a range of skills and aptitudes.

3) Barriers

Young people identified a set of barriers that they felt prevented or made it difficult for them to take up apprenticeships. Staff working with them provided additional information.

For some young people transport was an issue. One young man had had to refuse the offer of an apprenticeship when he was sixteen because there was no adequate public transport. Others reported taking college courses instead of apprenticeships because a bus was provided for college, but there was no transport provision to help them get to apprenticeship placements. Transport was more often mentioned in Haverfordwest and Neath Port Talbot than it was in Llanelli or Cardiff, but it was mentioned in Cardiff as a barrier when apprenticeship options involved shift work that didn't fit with public transport provision, or where opportunities were offered in parts of the city not served by public transport links.

Being ready and able to take up an apprenticeship was identified by some young people.

“You need to be tidy, organised. Stuff like learning to turn up on time. I just don't think I'm up for that.” (Young woman 16, in college)

Staff reported that some of the funding streams to which their projects had to deliver, including European funding, were set up in such a way that it was hard to spend enough time with young people working on soft skills, like attitudes and things as basic as personal hygiene. They also felt that the pressure of delivering accredited qualifications for young people often meant that the staff could not spend enough time with them to really develop their literacy and numeracy skills, which were often very poor.

One young person, who was studying for A Levels, felt he had been pushed down an academic route at fourteen, when he would have preferred to combine GCSEs with more practical learning. He felt that vocational options in his school were only offered to the less

academically able. He was now considering the option of apprenticeship after A Levels, but felt that a broader curriculum from fourteen would have prepared him better for this choice. He felt that teachers in his school did not place the same value on vocational as on academic learning. This was an unexpected perspective, and was supported by some of the staff we spoke with. It may be worth exploring further.

Some young people felt that information and access to opportunities for apprenticeships was a real problem. They believed that opportunities would tend to go to those with family or personal connections and were unlikely to be advertised. Indeed some young people who were seriously considering taking up or were planning to take up apprenticeship options had gained access to those opportunities through just such informal routes. Some staff supporting young people said that they also found it hard to get access to information about apprenticeships, saying that they felt that some in the careers service did not see apprenticeship as an option for “our” young people, meaning young people at risk of finding themselves not in education training or employment. On the other hand, some young people, especially those in the Cardiff and the Vale College, were very positive about the information about opportunities they received through Careers Wales.

Finance was also identified as a barrier. Some of the young people just wanted what they described as “a real job”. These tended to be the same young people who saw apprenticeship as exploitative. One young woman said it was hard to stick to her apprenticeship when her friends were earning higher wages. She acknowledged that lots of them were in what she called “*dead end jobs*” but did find it hard to keep her longer term goals in mind when they were able to afford things she could not. Several young people reported feeling they had to choose college instead of apprenticeships that they would have preferred because of family finances. Parents continue to receive child benefit for young people aged sixteen to eighteen if they are studying in college, in addition to the young person receiving Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Child benefit stops if a young person is doing an apprenticeship, as they are deemed to be working.

“On an apprenticeship you don’t end up taking home more than EMA, not once you’ve paid for the bus and food and everything. And your Mam loses her money. It (apprenticeship) is just not a real option for kids from poor families, if you ask me. It’s not really for the working class.” (Young graduate, volunteering to work with young people, unable to find a job using her degree)

Many young people agreed with this perspective, and staff cited specific examples where young people had felt forced to choose the college route, even when it was not the best option for them.

The Welsh Government should give consideration as to how the transport issues could be addressed. Subsidising travel for young people undertaking apprenticeships might be one option, if free transport for young people as advocated by many is unaffordable. In areas where public transport isn't available, or doesn't work because of shift work, creative solutions may be needed. We have heard, for example, of some local authorities in England buying scooters for young people, or providing low cost loans to enable young people to buy them.

Consideration needs to be given as to the effectiveness of the funding provided to projects that work with young people, particularly those identified as being at risk of finding themselves not in training, education or employment. Is the need to get young people through accredited qualifications within given time frames getting in the way of providing the kind of support they really need to get themselves job, and therefore, apprenticeship, ready? The evidence we gathered suggests that this is so, but of course is anecdotal. There is also a question as to how schools are preparing young people for practical learning opportunities like apprenticeships, how soon the possibility of this option is raised with young people, and whether schools really see vocational learning as equal to academic learning for all young people.

It would appear that more work is needed to ensure that young people are aware of the apprenticeship options that might be available to them, and that government, local and national, needs to work closely with employers to develop and advertise a wider range of opportunities for apprenticeships. Of course it will never be possible to prevent altogether the offering of opportunities being offered to those with connections, but advertising should be actively encouraged, and any public financial support should depend on the opportunities being advertised.

The financial barriers are difficult to address. The need to tackle bad employers treating 'apprentices' unfairly has already been mentioned. The benefits trap issue is not of course one that the Welsh Government can address directly, but it may be that some extension of EMA could be considered to help families that find themselves worse off if a young person chooses an apprenticeship rather than college.

Conclusion

Youth Cymru is grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to present young people's views on this important issue. Many young people asked us to pass on their thanks.

"It's good to be asked about this. People should find out what we think. Will they listen, though?" (Young man, 17, in college though he'd rather be 'learning by doing')

We felt able to reassure him that the Committee would listen, though of course stressing that doesn't mean that the Committee would necessarily agree!

Young people, and staff, also said that they would be happy to speak to Committee members or Committee staff directly if that was felt to be useful. Youth Cymru would be happy to facilitate such discussions if the Committee were to wish to do so, but we did explain to young people that time constraints might mean that was not possible.

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