

Introduction

ColegauCymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the National Assembly for Wales' Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee inquiry into Apprenticeships in Wales 2017. ColegauCymru is a charity and limited company that represents the 14¹ Further Education (FE) colleges and FE institutions in Wales and exists to promote the public benefit of post compulsory education and learning.²

ColegauCymru undertakes regular research, develops policy and provides responses based on the best available evidence, utilising our network of educators and policy experts. Our policy is informed by regular exchange of ideas and experiences facilitated by the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme and through participation in the British Council's International Education Programme.

Colleges are major providers of general education provision in Wales, helping to produce some of the best learner outcomes. Colleges are the predominant providers of funded vocational and technical education in Wales, providing about 85% of the total provision.

Response

1. In the nearly five years since the then Enterprise and Business Committee of the National Assembly for Wales published the findings of its inquiry into apprenticeships, the picture across Wales remains mixed. Improvements have been made in some areas such as an increase in the numbers of apprenticeships while in others, such as gender segregation, there has been much less progress. Many of the recommendations have been delivered to some extent. The network of work-based learning providers has been particularly successful with the Further Education led consortia demonstrating effective employer links and excellent quality provision.
2. Across Wales, colleges work effectively to promote and develop apprenticeship opportunities, update frameworks etc. with external bodies to ensure they can offer high quality apprentice programmes. Advice to potential apprentices is still patchy with the most significant barrier being an unwillingness in the schools sector to engage with colleges and other providers to provide advice and guidance to all levels of learners. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy, together with positive press about apprenticeships, has raised expectations and demand and there is a concern that there will be insufficient funding to meet that extra demand.
3. It is important to remember that work-based learning accounts for only just over a quarter of the 224,410 learners in Further Education, Community Learning and

¹ The 14 include 10 FE corporations including St David's Catholic College; the two FE institutions – Adult Learning Wales; and The College Merthyr Tydfil, Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg Ceredigion which are part of university groupings.

² In this paper the terms 'FE college' and 'college' are used to cover FE colleges and FE institutions.

Work-based Learning recorded by StatsWales for 2015-16.³ In terms of learners aged 16-19 involved in work-based learning (including traineeships and other programmes, as well as apprenticeships), in 2015-16, there were 17,520 unique learners, representing just over 30 per cent of the total number of people undertaking work-based learning (which stood at 57,100).⁴ The wider contribution that Further Education colleges make to vocational education and skills, beyond apprenticeships, needs to be recognised.

4. Apprenticeships and vocational education will play a vital role in helping to meet the Welsh Government's target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Welsh language issues need to be taken into consideration in future apprenticeship policy and its implementation.

Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs); the Wales Employment and Skills Board (WESB); and Sector Skills Councils

5. The role of the Regional Skills Partnerships is important given their remit of analysing and influencing the provision of skills based on regional economic need, to support growth and key infrastructure projects in each region. The RSPs have become more prominent recently. In South East Wales, colleges report that the regional skills partnership (LSKIP) provides useful information to target apprenticeship provision at a local and regional level. Engagement between RSPs and Further Education colleges is generally positive. However, given that the recent speeches by the Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, Ken Skates AM, suggest a different Welsh Government approach to the economy, a reconsideration or expansion of the role of RSPs may be necessary. A new economic strategy more focused on regional economies and a smaller number of national, foundational economy sectors, such as healthcare and energy, will need more nuanced data and capacity. There is potential to situate some of this work in FE colleges.
6. However, some changes to RSPs already seem to be taking place with work around the North Wales Growth Deal bid suggesting that a new committee, underneath the Joint Committee of the Local Authorities leading the bid, will take the role of the existing RSP. There does not appear to have been discussion with the FE sector, or

³ This does not take into account the additional 27,899 school pupils aged 16 or over for the same time period, meaning that more than three quarters of people aged 16 or over studying at FE, at school, or as part of Community Learning, are not part of work-based learning. Source - Stats Wales, see: 'Learning programme numbers by provision type, mode and gender', available at:

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Lifelong-Learning-Wales-Record/learningprogrammes-by-provisiontype-mode-gender> ; Pupils by local authority, region and age group, available at: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Pupils/pupils-by-localauthorityregion-agegroup> .

⁴ Source: Stats Wales – see 'Unique learners in work-based learning provision by age group, gender and programme type', available at: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Work-Based-Learning/uniquelearnersworkbasedlearning-by-age-gender-programmetype> .

others more widely, as to whether this is desirable or brings unintended consequences.

7. The prominence of the Regional Skills Partnerships moving forward is clearly apparent and good progress has been made within the respective regions to bring all key bodies together around the apprenticeships agenda. There are opportunities for these bodies to become even more prominent post Brexit, to the point of becoming funders of apprenticeships (LEP model) avoiding unnecessary, bureaucratic procurement exercises that serve to disturb and destabilise the WBL network (made up of colleges and other WBL providers) and provide over-inflated, private sector, contracts. Such a move should be taken with much thought and consideration around the best needs for employers within the region and for the use of tax payers' funds.
8. The operation of Sector Skills Councils across Wales and their engagement in Wales is patchy. Some, such as Skills for Logistics, have closed, while in other cases, existing bodies have taken on their responsibilities. Social Care Wales (formerly Care Council for Wales) has now taken on the role of the SSC in Wales. Colleges report that where SSCs are very active, they are really effective in signposting need and engaging with providers and employers. However, in some areas SSCs do not have enough of a presence in Wales to have an impact or influence. The future of sector skills councils remains very bleak, with the trailblazer reforms in England progressing at pace. There are serious questions over what the future holds for these bodies and who will lead on the development of new, innovative Higher Level frameworks in Wales?
9. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) closed in March 2017 which further weakened cross-UK working on these issues. The Chair of WESB, Scott Waddington, was Wales Commissioner to the UKCES, providing a link between UK level discussions and Wales. Our understanding is that Welsh Government has been seeking to re-evaluate WESB over the past year or so and the first meeting for some time is due to take place in May 2017. While such Boards needs to be kept to a manageable size, it would be useful to have a representative from the Further and Higher Education sectors to hear employer views, take part in discussions around skills and employment, and feed back to key networks. This has already been taken into consideration with invites to sit on WESB being extended to ColegauCymru and Universities Wales.
10. We note the Welsh Government intention to use WESB as the vehicle to assist with ensuring that apprenticeships are flexible and responsive to the needs of industry and would be interested in further details of how WESB would fulfil this role.⁵ The terms of reference and membership for WESB defined in April 2017 include key

⁵ Welsh Government, *Aligning the Apprenticeship model to the needs of the Welsh economy* (February, 2017), available at <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/170206-app-policy-plan-en-v2.pdf>.

representatives who can set strategic direction but it is not clear that this is the right group or forum to “advise on Apprenticeship framework developments with the aim of delivering a maximum of 30 high performing Apprenticeship frameworks to drive forward the Welsh economy” as stated in the Welsh Government’s recent ‘Aligning the Apprenticeship model to the needs of the Welsh economy’.⁶ The latter aim seems much more detailed and operational than it would be possible or desirable for a Board of the existing type to undertake.

To scrutinise the accessibility of independent careers advice on Apprenticeships and other vocational options, particularly for young people, either in school, from Careers Wales, online or from other sources?

11. Access to apprenticeship information in general has significantly improved; this has been due to increased focus and direction of Welsh Government with the drive to increase apprenticeship delivery. Alongside this, additional vocational pathways such as ESF Upskilling S01 & S02 project have also seen increased promotion and guidance.
12. More referral and dialogue directly with providers and employers has been developed by Welsh Government acting independently and directing the employer to the potential provider.
13. Aside from this, there has been little progress. Career advice and guidance to young people in schools regarding apprenticeships is still questionable, with apprenticeships seen as the non-academic pathway and possibly for the lower achievers. This is an image and stigma that must change, schools must consider the end result, jobs, professional training and potentially Higher and Degree Apprenticeships or Access to HE. Colleges report still finding that school pupils are not receiving suitable information regarding apprenticeships. They do not understand the opportunities available and often events in schools happen too late in the year for the large schemes. More able and talented learners are still being focused towards A Levels then university instead of into a higher level. That certain vocational qualifications are equivalent to three A Levels is still under recognised. Choice should not be limited at this stage in a young person’s life and they need to be made aware of apprenticeship frameworks that may be available and more suitable.
14. The availability of careers advice in schools is diminishing. It is essential, if careers through apprenticeships are to flourish, that high quality advice and guidance is provided through schools, colleges and, at a national level, the Welsh Government. This will ensure that there is parity of esteem with the traditional A Level route.

⁶ Welsh Government, Aligning the Apprenticeship model, page 23; page 28.

15. Colleges are very willing to work with schools in providing advice but report facing barriers from schools in efforts to engage students. Consideration should be given to mandating schools to invite colleges in to discuss the wide variety of options available at post-16 level.
16. Careers Wales has faced a difficult time in terms of cuts to funding and the subsequent necessary restructuring over several years. Between 2010-11 and 2016-17, the advisory service saw a cut of 57 per cent to its core budget, from £42M to a projected £18M. Given the further budget shortfall Careers Wales identified in 2017, this will lead to further redundancies. By the end of 2016, it was estimated that there would only be 40 careers advisors serving Wales' secondary schools with a ratio of one to every 4,500 pupils.⁷ A decision is needed about the future remit and funding of the Careers Service. The quality of service it is able to provide is variable which is unsurprising under the circumstances.
17. Cuts to the Careers Wales service mean support is mainly targeted towards the higher risk pupils and that support is not always of the quality needed. Initiatives such as Have a Go help but go nowhere near far enough towards offering IAG. Schools need to be mandated to offer IAG to all students, including the more able and talented. Welsh Government should also consider which agencies are best placed to offer IAG, with Careers Wales now seemingly not having capacity. The FE sector would seem to be well placed to lead on this.
18. The advice and guidance market including online, has seen the introduction and growth of some new private providers who are capitalising on the cuts and service limitations of Careers Wales. However, this type of service in many cases is not independent, with training providers entering financial contracts and/or paying for referrals. An alternative approach to consider would be to encourage schools to allow colleges and other WBL providers to engage with learners and positively promote the vocational pathway.

Is the Careers Wales' Apprenticeship Matching Service (AMS) fit for purpose?

19. Some colleges find the interface and search function is not very user friendly but having a dedicated site is a useful free tool. Improvements have been made but there are still issues around user friendliness and suitability. Other platforms are creating engaging apps and matching services that link individuals to courses, apprenticeships and other training opportunities. Some colleges noted that local opportunities are rarely seen on the AMS and it is also unclear if school leavers or learners in years 10 and 11 are aware of the service.

⁷ Western Mail, 4 March 2016, available at: <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/4500-pupils-every-one-careers-10987642>.

20. Whilst operationally the AMS offers a useful service to both employers and prospective apprentices, at the time of writing it currently has 209 live vacancies which is not truly representative of how many vacancies are currently available throughout Wales. Of course, there are a myriad of different entry points into an apprenticeship of which the AMS is just one. However, there is great disparity within the WBL network of colleges and providers over the use of AMS. Some providers embed the use of AMS within their offer to employers and apprentices whereas others do not use the system at all. If the AMS is to really become the 'go to place' for apprentices, employers and their parents, there should be a more robust onus, or even an incentive for providers to use the system.

How can better parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes be achieved?

21. Much of this relates back to the issues raised in relation to careers advice. Too often, apprenticeships and vocational options are still not discussed as a realistic and desirable option for more able and talented learners, yet there are apprenticeships and BTEC qualifications that lead onto higher level learning, some of which reach degree level, with the added bonus of work experience. The apprentice route may not be the right approach for everyone but apprenticeships are often not presented as an appropriate option for high achieving learners. There is a need for mandated independent IAG from fit for purpose agencies within schools from Key Stage 3.
22. There is a need for more targeted marketing and 'success story' case studies to highlight opportunities. Further development of 'junior apprenticeships' to taste vocational provision at key stage 4 in partnership with schools, colleges and private training providers and raising awareness of degree level apprenticeships e.g. the Network 75 programme with the University of South Wales, would also raise awareness of the route as a genuine and valuable alternative.
23. Consideration should be given to applying UCAS points to vocational and Apprenticeships pathways supporting progress to Higher Education along with more positive marketing in relation to progression pathways and success stories where more able and talented learners have chosen apprenticeship pathways and achieved higher apprenticeship outcomes and/or progressed to high end jobs.
24. Many colleges offer qualification pathways that allow progression to university and apprenticeships. This has ensured some parity of esteem while most apprenticeship pathways have specific entry requirements at the same level of academic pathways, e.g. Engineering, Science, AAT and other technical pathways. Rebranding of apprenticeships at higher levels, such as moving towards designations like 'Mastercraftsperson', could also be helpful. Terminology matters with existing skilled people not necessarily finding the term 'apprentice' attractive. There is a need for more higher level and degree level options.

25. Esteem issues can be compounded by the financial landscape. At £3.50 per hour, the minimum wage for apprentices who are under 19 or over 19 but in the first year of their apprenticeship is lower than that for either under 18s (£4.05) or 18-20 year olds (£5.60).⁸ This is in comparison with the revised student finance arrangements recommended by the “Diamond Review” where the top rate of maintenance grant support for undergraduates is based on the minimum wage for over 25 year olds, which is currently £7.50.⁹
26. As the Welsh Government seeks to implement the recommendations of the Hazelkorn Review, the future Tertiary Education Authority should be obliged to give parity of esteem to vocational and academic routes and make all decisions in line with this principle. This could greatly assist with how both areas are regarded in the longer term, with vocational routes receiving equal treatment from the new body.
27. In order to maintain low levels of unemployment and improve productivity, all routes into employment must be considered. If there is an imbalance between graduate job opportunities and graduates, we risk doing a dis-service in promoting one route into employment over another.

To investigate the main barriers to taking up Apprenticeships

28. Apprenticeships can seem daunting for small companies who might assume that it is costly to engage an apprentice. Coleg y Cymoedd’s work with Aspire in Blaenau Gwent, for example, has been very successful in providing a co-ordinated approach to shared apprenticeships in advanced manufacturing – this could be expanded to other geographical and sector areas.

How accessible are Apprenticeships for people with disabilities (all ages)?

29. This is dependent on the nature of the employment and whether reasonable adjustments can be made. Colleges report seeing more demand for support with additional learning needs with the increasing rise of self-disclosure of needs. Apprenticeships are available for all (all ages, abilities) and all facilities cater for learners with disabilities and ALN. However, providers are limited to support and deliver opportunities to those individuals that the employer decides to recruit. Not all businesses are able to cater for the wide range of learners that may be offered apprenticeship opportunities. Some pump prime funding would be useful to raise awareness and support employers to make premises more accessible to learners.

⁸ See <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates> .

⁹ Professor Sir Ian Diamond, The Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales, page 41, para 9.1.5, available at <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/160927-he-review-final-report-en.pdf>

30. The 2012 National Assembly Enterprise and Business Committee report into Apprenticeships highlighted the difficulties people without access to a car faced when trying to take up apprenticeships, especially if apprenticeships involved shift work with early mornings or late finishes. This is likely to be a particular issue for people with disabilities. Research by Leonard Cheshire Disability in 2011 found that disabled people in Wales are almost twice as likely as non-disabled people to live in a low income household; 33% (130,000) of working age disabled people in Wales live in poverty — a figure higher than anywhere else in the UK; in Wales a non-disabled person is twice as likely to have a job as a disabled person and this disparity is greater in Wales than anywhere else in the UK; 23% of disabled people have had to turn down a job due to a lack of accessible transport.¹⁰ Consideration needs to be given to how learners can actually get to the sites of their apprenticeships with a focus on accessible travel.

How can people from the lowest income families be supported to take-up Apprenticeships?

31. Careers advice to school pupils is crucial here with an emphasis on ensuring that they understand the routes available, including higher level apprenticeships, where concern to avoid the large debt that Higher Education incurs is a factor. Traineeship programmes offer additional support for learners with chaotic home lives, who can struggle to make the step into apprenticeships, which is welcome.
32. It is essential that existing family benefits are not affected by any learner taking up an apprenticeship opportunity and that potential apprentices are made aware of this at an early stage of the recruitment process. Family tax credits / child benefits need to be maintained for those on apprenticeship programmes, specifically for those families with low income and for families where the apprenticeship does not exceed a maximum salary. There should be assistance to cover transport costs if state aid rules apply. Deprivation Contingency Funding schemes that operate across many providers are good examples of how extra support can be offered. Good practice in this area could be more widely shared across the network.

What good practice exists and what more can be done to address gender stereotyping?

33. In terms of general good practice, the Shared Apprenticeships scheme is an excellent way of engaging business and in particular small and medium enterprises. There needs to be a greater focus in schools on the importance of the workplace by arranging more visits for school pupils to local business from years 7-8 in secondary schools.

¹⁰ Disability Poverty in Wales, Leonard Cheshire Disability (2011), available at: <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/Disability,P20Poverty,P20in,P20Wales.pdf.pagespeed.ce.W-KmgGI75V.pdf>.

34. Regarding gender stereotyping, many good schemes exist such as women into engineering and construction and individual employers also provide different opportunities. However, some colleges report that these activities are hard to fund and may benefit from additional resources.
35. Colleges and other providers are good at recognising where male / female apprentices work in a sector normally dominated by the opposite gender – for example females in engineering and construction. The norm is for these individuals to be used as positive role models and ambassadors to promote gender balance in all sectors. In most cases these individuals will visit schools to share their experiences. There are excellent ambassadors of good practice with non-traditional or stereotypical apprentices flourishing within their sector. The current National Apprentice of the Year is a female Engineer with Ford and an excellent ambassador for women entering STEM careers. There are lots of initiatives that try to address the gender imbalances in specific sectors such as construction, engineering and hair & beauty which seem to have had little effect over the past five years. More should be done to encourage and offer opportunities for local ambassadors to speak with school children regularly about following careers in traditionally non male/female occupations. This might include offering incentives to employers to allow this type of activity to take place.
36. Despite a long track record of trying to address gender imbalance and stereotyping of particular occupations, progress in areas such as construction has been very limited. Taking apprenticeship learning programmes in construction in 2015-16 as an example: of the 4,675 foundation, apprenticeship and higher apprenticeships, 4,555 were male as compared to 120 females.¹¹ Initiatives such as the Women Building Wales pilot, a partnership between NPTC Group of Colleges, Women into Construction and Chwarae Teg should be followed up, with consideration given as to how best practice can be applied to other areas.¹² Feedback from Chwarae Teg on the pilot showed the importance and underestimated costs of childcare. There is a need to consider how apprenticeships in areas which show gender imbalance can be made more flexible and attractive, taking into account specific barriers such as child care (or other caring) responsibilities and financial support for study.
37. Wales is not the only country where apprenticeships tend to be gender segregated. Many of the recommendations of the late 2013 England-focussed report – “Under-representation by gender and race in Apprenticeships: Research summary” could be

¹¹ Source: Stats Wales – see <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Work-Based-Learning/learningprogrammesapprenticeships>

¹² See <https://www.cteg.org.uk/women-in-construction-building-wales/> .

applied to Wales.¹³ Much of this report suggests actions or activities that are not new but perhaps need to be undertaken more consistently and effectively, for example tackling gender stereotyping in careers earlier, employer engagement and use of role models. However, there may be scope in Wales to consider providing additional funding for the recruitment and retention of non-traditional candidates using payment-by-results.

To scrutinise the development of higher level Apprenticeships, with the support of further and higher education institutions

38. Again there is a need to raise awareness amongst employers on a national basis about the benefits of higher level apprenticeships and the added value to the workforce. As part of this process dialogue with local colleges and universities is essential in order to match the demand and supply of employment opportunities.
39. Colleges report that levy payers in particular are unhappy at having to fund the cost of the HE element in frameworks. We have seen the development of higher level apprenticeships that do not require the HE element as the technical certificate which is proving popular in some areas such as food manufacturing, leadership and management, business administration, health and social care, childcare and play work, salon management, finance, IT. However, in particular the engineering and construction sectors require the HE qualification.
40. The WBL sector of colleges and other providers is very responsive to industry and needs to operate at a fast pace and make quick and responsive decisions. The message regarding higher and degree apprenticeships is around creating demand with employers, especially as we see the levy introduced. Employers now want a wider portfolio of options at all levels. Although some pathways are available at level 4 and 5, there are still many that are not developed. However, the development of new higher level qualifications and the university approval process can be very time consuming, which is not employer responsive. For higher level qualifications to be developed to respond to need, HE and FE need to have smarter and quicker processes. Alternatively, colleges and other WBL providers need to know timelines throughout the year where new approvals can be submitted to HEIs.
41. Potential for innovation exists in areas that have not traditionally engaged with apprenticeships, such as the NHS. England, for example, is developing an apprenticeship into nursing. Collectively Welsh Government, education and employers must think creatively about what an apprenticeship can do to support a sector to thrive.

¹³ See Becci Newton and Joy Williams, Under-representation by gender and race in Apprenticeships: Research summary, Institute for Employment Studies Research paper 18 (2013), available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/UnderRepresentationInApprenticeships.pdf>

How effective is progression between other work-based learning and Apprenticeships and between Levels 2, 3, 4 and above Apprenticeships?

42. There has been some good progress here with a plethora of Higher Apprenticeship qualifications having been developed. There is still work to be done in terms of progression from Higher Apprenticeship programmes HNC/HND into higher level education. Degree apprenticeships and the potential for HEIs to play a more active role will help this transition. The new body for all post-16 education in Wales recommended as a result of the Hazelkorn Review, has a key part to play in helping establish a transparent pathway in all sectors from entry level through to degree/masters level apprenticeships, with various entry and exit points. It is disappointing that Welsh Government seem reluctant to support provision at level 2 when there is clearly a need for learners to enter and, in some cases, exit at this level. While higher skills are desirable in many cases, there is a need to take a pragmatic and realistic approach to supporting learners at the level they currently are.
43. Progression between Levels 2 and 3 is generally good but the pool progressing immediately from 3 to 4 is lower due to various factors such as the need for experience, or time off from study after a demanding Level 3. It is also important to note that the competence element of a framework is related to the evidence that can be gathered in an apprentice's current job role. Some job roles mean the learner cannot gain the necessary evidence so succession planning can be difficult. Levy payers in particular are unhappy at having to fund the cost of the HE element in frameworks which can be a barrier for progression to Level 4.
44. The level of progression between level 2, level 3 and higher pathways varies across occupational sectors. The majority of learners following construction pathways will progress from level 2 to level 3. However, these learners do not generally progress to higher apprenticeship programmes. Within Engineering apprentices will progress to HNC and HND qualification, although this is not always following the higher apprenticeship pathway. The reason for this is that the relevant NVQ for the higher apprenticeship framework includes leadership responsibilities. Despite the sector requiring a highly skilled workforce and the need for higher qualifications, responsibilities do not immediately include leadership or supervisory, therefore making the competence element difficult to achieve and evidence.
45. In other sectors such as Management, Customer Service, Business Administration, Childcare and Health & Social Care, progression depends upon the individual roles and responsibilities and, as above, many of the progression pathways and higher qualifications require leadership and management responsibilities. On some occasions this can be overcome with additional duties or through the completion of projects. Although the latter allows the learner to complete specific units and gives exposure to high level responsibilities, it can cause additional workload for the learner and it can be difficult to find assessment opportunities.

How can employer engagement with Apprenticeships be improved?

46. There is increased demand from employers and the sectors served by Further Education institutions for higher level skills and developing a more qualified and skilled workforce. This creates a number of challenges, for example:
- Developing new qualification pathways
 - Ensuring pathways are suitable for the individual and employer
 - Flexible unit selection
 - Employers / employee(s) making suitable adjustments to individual responsibilities to meet the demands of the qualification criteria.
47. Welsh language / bilingual apprenticeship opportunities must be considered from the outset and be integrated into the apprenticeship offer to employers. We are due to see a growth in the demand for bilingual skills, and as such, Welsh language apprenticeships are crucial to supporting the demand and providing equal opportunities to Welsh and English speakers post-16.
48. Most current college provision is within Welsh Government priority sectors and colleges are only able to deliver up to 10 per cent in non-priority sectors. The introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy is bringing new challenges. For example, some colleges are already seeing demand from call centre organisations and other anchor companies that are requesting high volumes of starts in response to the costs of the Apprenticeship Levy. Colleges are unable to meet this demand within the current priority constraints and this can make it difficult to respond positively to employers which may deter future engagement. Another example is administration, customer service and warehousing positions within engineering organisations. The sector is a priority sector but these individual pathways are low priority. The April 2017 guidance which states that all level 2 apprenticeships in non-priority sectors will be exempt from the 10 per cent limit where it is the learner's intention to progress to level 3 is welcome. However, it will not entirely solve the issue of employers requesting mass starts in non-priority sectors where there is not a commitment to progression to level 3 or above.
49. The introduction of the levy has meant more companies are thinking about training and development. Linking effectively with companies to ensure they have the correct information about opportunities available for taking apprentices and upskilling current workforce is key. Clarity around the apprenticeship levy and the impact in Wales was slow in coming forward which has resulted in some confusion and discontent from larger employers. There needs to be clear direction over how portability of qualifications/frameworks/standards will work for cross-border employers or for apprentices in Wales with ambition to travel further afield in their career.

50. Generally, the WBL network of colleges and other providers engages well with employers. However, there is a need for better industry and school / FE links. Many colleges work well with employers, encouraging them to speak to learners and get involved in activities. Employers are the key to improving the perception of apprenticeships and can support colleges in improving the parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes.
51. The Welsh Government's recent 'Aligning the Apprenticeship model to the needs of the Welsh economy' publication noted that the Employer Perspectives Survey suggests that there is room for Apprenticeships to develop further beyond the current 13% of employers engaged with the Apprenticeship programme, especially among smaller employers.¹⁴ However, this data seems to cover the period 2011-14 so it would be useful to know if there has been progress on this figure more in more recent years.
52. It is vital to consider company size in any discussion of employer engagement with larger businesses being far more likely to have the capacity to engage than micro businesses. Care must be taken to ensure that apprenticeships work for smaller businesses and are not solely designed to meet the needs of larger companies. In 2016, 98.5 per cent of businesses in Wales were small or micro businesses and they need to be clear targets of engagement. Jobs Growth Wales offers a good entry point and the Young Recruits Programmes seemed to have an impact.¹⁵ Welsh Government needs to support small businesses to be able to engage and encourage them to continue or consider taking apprentices. FE colleges are developing a good track record of working with businesses of all sizes to meet business need and develop Wales' future workforce.
53. Many companies have long serving and loyal employees that they are looking to retrain, outside the 16-19 age range which has often been the focus of apprenticeship messaging. Consideration must be given as to how best retraining and upskilling of employees of all ages can be supported, with the emphasis on the Welsh Government's commitment to creating at least 100,000 all age apprenticeships before the end of the current National Assembly term in May 2021.
54. Beyond this, it is vital to remember that apprenticeships are not the only solution to upskilling and reskilling people across Wales. Employers also need other sorts of training and skills programmes that reductions in part time funding have adversely affected in recent years. Communities and individuals could also benefit from this approach. Analysis of skills must take account of the need to retrain and reskill older workers and ensure that opportunities are available for 'learn while you earn', digital and blended learning, as well as learning opportunities which can accommodate

¹⁴ Welsh Government, *Aligning the Apprenticeship model*, page 36.

¹⁵ Source: Stats Wales, see <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Business-Economy-and-Labour-Market/Businesses/Business-Structure/Headline-Data/latestbusinessstructureinwales-by-sizeband-measure> .

uncertain working patterns and multi-generational caring responsibilities. If we are genuinely going to address the skills gaps and the economic potential of areas such as the middle and upper valleys, for example, a programme of training and funding to improve the levels of adult skills is needed. The co-investment strategy has failed to provide the solution to this. Such an approach – encouraging adults to return to learning or retrain – could also help to provide positive role models for young people in these areas.

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