

Apprenticeship pathways: Engagement Findings

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1. Engagement Summary

The following engagement summary offers an overview of the engagement programme design, delivery, and key findings.

Background

1. The Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry into apprenticeship pathways, with a focus on how well apprenticeship pathways are understood, accessed, and valued by learners across Wales.
2. The Committee wished to hear directly from current apprentices and apprentices completers. The Citizen Engagement Team facilitated focus groups and interviews with current apprentices and apprenticeship completers across Wales to gather their views and experiences.

Objectives

3. The objective of the focus groups and interviews was to provide insights into how well apprenticeship pathways are understood, accessed, and valued by learners across Wales.
4. Views were gathered to ensure that those with lived experience contributed to the evidence-gathering programme, with specific focus on the following inquiry terms of reference:
 - 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.
 - Information about apprenticeships: Good practice between careers services, schools, colleges and employers in terms of promoting apprenticeships and the provision of meaningful work experience.



- 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.

Methodology

5. Given the work place and college schedule associated with apprenticeships, online focus group and interviews were conducted to provide flexibility when gathering qualitative data from current apprentices and apprenticeship completers.
6. The engagement comprised of:
 - 5 online focus groups
 - 1 online interview.

Participants

7. Participants were sourced through partner organisations¹ across Wales, ensuring that lived experience of apprentices across different regions of Wales, from both rural and urban areas, were included.
8. Participants were all current apprentices or apprenticeship completers, ranging from level 2 to level 5.
9. Apprenticeship subject areas included: Bakery, Beauty and Massage, Business Administration, Engineering, Health and Social Care, ILM Leadership and Management, Motor Vehicle, Pharmaceutical Leadership and Management, Project Management, Plumbing, Trading Standards, Welding and Fabrication.
10. Women in traditionally male-dominated subject areas took part in the engagement programme, for example, welding and engineering as did men from women-dominated subject areas, for example health and social care.

¹ See Annex 2

Ethical Considerations

11. Where necessary, focus groups were conducted under tutor supervision.
12. All methods used in this project adhered to the standards set out in the Market Research Society Code of Conduct and complied with relevant data protection and safeguarding legislation to ensure the ethical treatment and privacy of all participants.

Key Findings

Careers advice

13. Participants expressed mixed views on the quality and relevance of careers advice received in school and college. Many were unaware of apprenticeships as a career pathway when they left school, which could have significantly influenced their career choices.
14. Schools predominantly promoted traditional academic routes, often neglecting to provide tailored advice that aligned with students' interests and career aspirations
15. Experiences with work experience opportunities varied. While some participants had no opportunities, others had non-career-related experiences. Those who did have relevant work experience found it valuable in understanding the workplace reality.

Barriers to apprenticeships

16. Informational Barriers: A lack of information about apprenticeships was a common issue. Participants noted that proactive efforts were required to find detailed information.
17. Educational Barriers: Insufficient information in schools about the qualifications needed for apprenticeships led some participants to return to college to meet the requirements.
18. Financial Barriers: The apprenticeship wage posed a challenge for some, though participants acknowledged the long-term benefits.

19. Geographic Barriers: Urban areas offered more apprenticeship opportunities compared to rural areas, and lack of public transport was a barrier for some.

Experience of apprenticeships

20. Participants unanimously advocated for apprenticeships, highlighting the hands-on learning approach and the opportunity to earn while learning.

21. Apprenticeships were seen as a valuable career pathway, offering practical skills and financial stability without the burden of university debt.

Perceived value of apprenticeships

22. Participants challenged traditional perceptions of apprenticeships as a secondary option, emphasising the need for equal recognition alongside academic routes.

23. There was a call for better employer education on the benefits of apprenticeships for both the workforce and the organisation.

Thank you to everyone who gave their time and contributed to the programme of engagement.

2. Engagement Findings

This section outlines the key themes, views, and ways forward expressed by the people interviewed.

Careers advice

24. Participants shared their views about the quality and relevance of the careers advice they received in school and college.

Access to information

25. The majority of participants were unaware of apprenticeships as a career pathway when they left school, suggesting that their career pathway might have been very different had they been introduced to apprenticeships at the time.

“If we had been more educated about them [apprenticeships] then maybe this would have been a path I might have chosen after school.”

26. Participants spoke about “*stumbling across apprenticeships*” and learning about apprenticeship opportunities “*by accident*”.

27. Some participants were made aware of apprenticeships but did not receive any in-depth information about apprenticeships as a viable option.

28. Some participants received far more information about apprenticeships whilst in college and others were introduced to apprenticeships by their employers.

29. However, some participants referred to the positive support they received from Careers Wales, whilst in school.

Focus on traditional academic route

30. Most participants noted that schools predominantly promoted the traditional academic route as the ‘obvious’ progression in their career pathway.

"Because I was good at Maths and Physics, I was told to do academia, but there was nothing tailored to what I wanted to do.....There was a big push to go to university, when I was in school.....that's all we heard about."

"The school's focus was definitely on going to university. There was an expectation – now that we were in the sixth form, the next step was to go to university."

31. A few participants expressed concerns about the motive behind the careers advice provided to some school learners.

"The salon I'm working in now, my mum actually owns and has done for 25 years, so I always knew that this is what I have wanted to do. I had meeting after meeting saying no, you need to stay on. You need to do your A levels, then you can go to university and then you can think about dropping back down to college and doing it that way, which is the most bizarre thing in the world because my GCSEs were all based around business.....It wasn't tailored at all to what helped me, it was all tailored to how it helped the school."

Work experience

32. There were mixed experiences regarding work experience while in school. Most participants had not been offered any work experience opportunities, whilst others mentioned non-career related work experience, acknowledging age restrictions and insurance issues.

"Although we did have that option of work experience.....it wasn't towards what you wanted to do. It was just wherever locally would take you."

33. However, those who were given the opportunity agreed that it was a worthwhile experience and gave an insight into the reality of being in the workplace.

"It's difficult to manage expectations....Although it's a bit of a let-down of a week, you can see how manic a salon is and that it isn't all about rainbows and sunshine."

34. One participant explained how his college work experience led to his apprenticeship.

Barriers to apprenticeships

Informational barriers

35. Many participants noted the lack of information about apprenticeships, available to them, while in school.

36. One participant shared his experience whilst unemployed.

"When I was unemployed, and going to the job centre to sign on, there was no mention of apprenticeships there either."

37. Participants who sought an apprenticeship whilst in employment agreed information (including in-depth information) is available about apprenticeships, but proactive efforts are required to find it.

38. One participant spent a year researching the best suited apprenticeship.

39. The information available about apprenticeships can be confusing, even for current apprentices.

"It can be quite complicated until somebody explains to you in more detail how it works."

40. There were mixed experiences regarding employer interest, knowledge and understanding of apprenticeships.

41. Some apprentices were approached by their employer who encouraged them to apply for an apprenticeship and guided them throughout the application process.

"I'm very lucky that my employer laid out everything in front of me that I can achieve, and it is entirely up to me how far I go, where I want to stop, and how far I'll let it take me."

42. Other apprentices struggled to persuade their employer to consider an apprenticeship and commented on the lack of employer knowledge and understanding of apprenticeships.

"My manager was unsure about the ins and outs of it [apprenticeship] and from a management perspective, whether she was going to get funding to cover me."

"I got really lucky...whilst I was in college I had to do work experience. I did my work experience where my current apprenticeship is; they didn't intend having an apprentice, but I was always in early and wanting to learn....and I actually asked them about it."

Educational barriers

43. Participants noted the impact of insufficient information in school about apprenticeships, including the qualifications required to apply for certain apprenticeships.

44. Some participants have had to return to college, to obtain the necessary grades before applying for an apprenticeship.

45. However, some mentioned the advantage of studying for certain grades within their apprenticeships, particularly for level 3 and above.

"I looked into doing my Maths and English GCSE, but that takes a lot of effort. When I've been sitting there with dying patients all day the last thing I want to do is to come home and sit in a lesson, learning about Maths and English.....But now, I'm able to learn things as well as keep my job role."

Financial barriers

46. Some participants expressed the challenges they initially faced, living on an apprentice wage.²

"The apprenticeship wage was a barrier for me - going from a decently paid job, and taking that cut, thinking am I going to be able to survive on that wage. But it was definitely worth taking the plunge."

"I had to figure out at the beginning whether I could afford rent, food and the travel costs, just to get to the apprenticeship and back...I did have to work through that and I did, and now it's great!"

47. Participants noted that although hard to come by, some well-paid apprenticeships are available, and large employers should be encouraged to extend and broaden their apprenticeship offer.

Geographic barriers

48. Participants living in urban areas, acknowledged that they have more apprenticeship opportunities than the participants living in rural areas.

"I come from a rural area of Wales but live in the city at the moment, as I want my children to have career opportunities that aren't available to them in rural areas."

49. Lack of public transport was also a barrier for some when considering their apprenticeship, requiring them to depend on others for transport.

"I can't drive yet; I get lifts into work. But the fact that it's decently close to where I live was convenient and helped with my decision to take the apprenticeship."

² [Minimum wage rates for 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

Experience of apprenticeships

50. All participants, regardless of their age, workplace experience and route to their apprenticeship, advocated for this career pathway.

"It was a massive turning point in life for me, to be honest. It definitely improved my morale....I was able to pursue exactly what I wanted to do....My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner."

"The apprenticeship has played an important role in my career path, especially as I am at the beginning of that journey and have experienced many forms of education....finding the apprenticeship was an important step for me."

The hands-on approach

51. The hands-on approach to learning was a key factor in the decision to take an apprenticeship. All participants spoke about how an apprenticeship *"prepares you and eases you into the reality of the workplace."*

"I don't think there is a single job...that can't be taught hands-on, like an apprenticeship. It's the best way to learn....I was a qualified nurse and have a degree in nursing and I genuinely don't believe education in university taught me anything....I learnt everything while on placements and being in the work environment."

52. Working with and learning from colleagues in the workplace was also a key factor.

"...[in Health and Social Care] you are dealing with a different client on every call, and you cannot learn that from a book.....One of the main things for me, is listening to and learning from other carers who've been in the job for years."

53. Participants spoke about the impact of their apprenticeship on the standard of their work.

"In doing the apprenticeship, I've seen a difference in my work – I've been able to put what I've learnt into practice....An apprenticeship makes you a better employee all round."

Learning and earning

54. Comparisons were made with the more traditional academic career route, with participants highlighting the different learning setting and possible financial factors.

"When I was in school, it was perceived that you go for an apprenticeship if you're not academic or you're not going to university. But today, it is accepted that it's a better option for a lot of people. You earn a wage, get a qualification and haven't got a massive university debt at the end."

55. The opportunity to learn and earn a living simultaneously, was another factor in the decision to take an apprenticeship, offering 'the best of both worlds.'

"Having gone through the ILM level 4 and ILM level 5 and being able to work and study has improved my knowledge and skills at the same time as earning a salary. You're more financially secure when doing an apprenticeship....I have recommended it to other people in my organisation."

Skills enhancing opportunity

56. Apprenticeships provide an opportunity for people of all ages, to upskill, which benefits both the employee and the employer.

"People assume it is for school leavers only or for people who are in college only but actually, it's available to other people too."

“No matter where you are in your life, you can still learn and develop yourself further through the apprenticeship process.”

57. Some participants noted the value of the ‘acknowledgement factor’ associated with apprenticeships and how it has improved their self-esteem.

“It's good to have something under your belt as well. Just a little certificate to say ‘I can do it’...That's nice.”

Perceived value of apprenticeships

Challenging ‘traditional’ perceptions

58. Participants challenged the ‘traditional’ perception of apprenticeships as a secondary option - the ‘*plan B route*’ - when considering career pathways.

“You're not a failure if you're taking apprenticeship. You are someone who needs to see it physically and learn on the job. You're someone who's driven, you need to be part of something and make the difference...I'm not slating the academic side, but we need to at least make it equal.”

59. Acknowledging that things have improved in recent years, participants agreed that apprenticeships need to be introduced to school learners on an equal par with other career pathways.

Challenging employer perception

60. While some participants noted continuous support from their employers, others highlighted the need to inform and educate employers about how apprenticeships can benefit both the workforce and the organisation/business.

Challenging other people's expectations

61. Parents' expectations and prejudices, and peer influence were a challenge for some participants wanting to pursue an apprenticeship pathway.

"Other than trying to convince my parents, there were no barriers at all for me because everything was very straightforward.....Mum and Dad aren't always right!"

"I've been lucky, but a lot of my friends were definitely waylaid by their friends and family. They've gone to do business degrees for nothing because their parents want them to go to university, but they don't know what they want to do."

3. Ways forward

In this section, we present a collection of ideas suggested by participants during the engagement sessions. These ideas represent diverse perspectives aimed at improving the current situation.

- 62.** The following suggested ways forward were proposed by participants during discussions as potential pathways for positive change and are shared here to inspire further dialogue and consideration.
- 63.** Despite recent improvements, apprenticeships should be introduced as a viable career pathway earlier in schools.
- 64.** Apprenticeships should be given equal status to academic routes when school learners are introduced to potential career pathways.
- 65.** School learners need to be well-informed about apprenticeship opportunities for all ages; this should go beyond merely raising awareness.
- 66.** Launch a campaign to inform employers of all sizes in Wales, about apprenticeships, and enable them to extend and broaden their apprenticeship offer.
- 67.** Develop a national apprenticeship hub to ease access to all apprenticeship-related information, including a clear explanation of the different types and levels of apprenticeships available. This would benefit both employees and employers.

Annex 1: Focus group and interview questions

The following questions served as a flexible guide for the focus groups and interviews.

68. The focus groups and interviews were participant-led, allowing for an organic conversation flow. The questions were used to facilitate discussion based on the participants' responses and needs.

Careers advice and information

1. Thinking about the quality and relevance of the careers advice you received in school, how accessible and appealing were apprenticeship opportunities compared to other educational or employment options?
2. Do you feel that you had sufficient information about apprenticeships and the chance to talk about them?
3. Were you offered any careers events where you could talk to local colleges and employers? If so, did you attend the event and could you tell us more about it? Was it easy to find information about apprenticeships there?
4. While in school, were you offered the opportunity to do work experience? If so, did it help you when deciding on your future career options?
5. Did your parents expectations or friends decisions influence your decision making on your future options after school?
6. How much of a factor was where you live when deciding on your future career and whether you'd do an apprenticeship?
7. Do you feel that vocational routes, such as apprenticeships, hold equal status compared to academic routes, such as A-Levels?
8. Do you think there is an idea that certain jobs or careers are better suited to apprenticeships and that others are more suited to traditional academic education?

Your apprenticeship experience

1. Why did you chose/not chose an apprenticeship career pathway?

2. How easy or hard was it to find, and apply for, an apprenticeship that matched your career goals?
3. What support did you receive while you were looking and applying for an apprenticeship? What improvements could be made?
4. Were you faced with any barriers whilst considering and applying for your apprenticeship?
5. How do you view your apprenticeship in terms of future career opportunities and progression?
6. What's your awareness of the different types and levels of apprenticeships available, such as degree apprenticeships? Do you think there is a clear progression route in your chosen apprenticeship field?
7. Would you recommend an apprenticeship to others?

Annex 2: Partner Organisations

69. Thank you to the following for their support in sourcing participants for the focus groups and interviews.

- Careers Wales
- Coleg Cambria
- Colegau Cymru
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
- Y Coleg Cymraeg