

Senedd Cymru

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig

Ymchwiliad: Llwybrau prentisiaeth

Cyf: AP02

Ymateb gan: Medr

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Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Inquiry: Apprenticeship pathways

Ref: AP02

Evidence from: Medr



Medr

Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

Apprenticeship pathways – inquiry by the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee

**Consultation
response |
February 2025**



Noddir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
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1. Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) is an arm's-length body of the Welsh Government, established by the [Tertiary Education and Research \(Wales\) Act 2022](#) to fund and regulate the tertiary education sector in Wales. Our vision is to work in close collaboration with our partners to enable a tertiary education and research system that is centred around the needs of learners, society and the economy with excellence, equality and engagement at its heart.
2. Medr is due to publish its Strategic Plan early in 2025, following approval from the Welsh Government. The Strategic Plan has been developed in consultation with our partners across Wales. The Strategic Plan sets out our response to the Welsh Government's [statement of strategic priorities for tertiary education and research and innovation](#). It outlines our strategic aims and commitments and describes the way in which we want to work to achieve them, integrated with the five ways of working set out in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.
3. In advance of giving oral evidence to the Committee, we provided an [evidence submission](#) which clarified Medr's role in the delivery of apprenticeships in Wales. In this response, we give more detail about how we are taking forward this role.

Pathways between apprenticeship levels

4. One of Medr's strategic aims is "to create a flexible and joined-up tertiary system where everyone can acquire the skills and knowledge they need for a changing economy and society". The creation of Medr is an opportunity to improve links between vocational provision and higher education and encourage collaboration between providers, to offer the best solution for the learner. Clear pathways between learning opportunities are central to this, recognising that the route might not always be linear and learners may move between different types of post-16 provision. Apprenticeships are only one element of the wider skills system and other options may be better suited to meeting the needs of the business or of the learner.
5. We have published our plan to review all 23 apprenticeship frameworks over the next three years. The purpose of the review is to make sure frameworks are current, that they take into account employer skills needs, and that they are robust in covering the skills needed for an individual to be competent in their profession. The reviews will ensure the frameworks respond to the rapidly changing skills needs, with green and digital skills key themes for all reviews. All reviews will look carefully at progression between apprenticeship levels, with the aim of enabling learners to progress more effectively and seamlessly without duplicating learning.
6. We recognise that there are challenges to progression in some sectors, for example where employers are not able to provide the experiences that learners need to meet the requirements of apprenticeships at higher levels. We will be exploring this challenge in the design of the new programme which will be in place from 2027, to ensure there are no unnecessary barriers to progression and to identify whether there are other ways that apprentices could be supported to gain the necessary skills. In order to ensure value from public funding, degree apprenticeships are currently offered in sectors which have potential for high value jobs and strong economic growth. Our framework reviews will be an opportunity to consider and highlight other pathways into higher level skills.
7. Junior apprenticeships are a form of 14-16 vocational provision delivered in a further education college (currently five, in different local authority areas). They are not an

apprenticeship, as the programme is not linked to any apprenticeship framework. They aim to keep those most at risk of disengaging in the mainstream curriculum by offering a different way of learning. The Estyn review of Junior Apprenticeships in May 2024 highlighted the success of the programme in retaining learners, with the majority going into mainstream post-16 further education provision.

Economy

8. The apprenticeship programme seeks to meet several Welsh Government priorities: the Programme for Government target of 100,000 starts, a component of the Young Persons' Guarantee, a way to deliver the higher level skills needed for growth while also supporting the foundational economy, and the primary form of training to meet the needs of specific industries. Our providers are seeing sustained demand, which suggests that apprenticeships do contribute to filling skills gaps, but we also recognise that there are challenges with the current system, for some economic sectors more than others and in terms of responsiveness to emerging skills needs.
9. We are limited by the current contractual arrangements as to the changes we can make in the short term, but we are also starting work to develop the new programme that will be delivered from 2027. The new programme will be developed in partnership with providers, employers, learners and Welsh Government, informed by evidence. We hope the new programme will give greater flexibility, enabling us to respond to changing needs and priorities, by better managing the balance of provision between sectors and encouraging collaboration to avoid duplication.
10. The development of the new programme will be carried out in the context of Medr's wider work looking at coherence of the tertiary offer across Wales. We need to think flexibility about how skills needs are met through a joined up tertiary education system, not necessarily just through apprenticeships. Some needs will be better met through a short, focused training such as is available through Personal Learning Accounts, or through the repurposing of existing provision, rather than developing a new framework, where time is needed to ensure the framework is robust.
11. We know that in the past there have been issues with frameworks not being up to date, for example including qualifications which are no longer available or not meeting changing industry standards. We have put a structured process in place to address these concerns with our programme of framework reviews. Each review will be informed by a steering group consisting of sector experts, technical experts, industry bodies and key partners, such as Qualifications Wales, and wider consultation.

Employers

12. Working with and listening to employers is an important consideration for Medr to inform our work. We brought together an employer forum as part of our consultation process on our strategic plan. We are considering how best to engage with employers on an ongoing basis, whether through establishing our own formal structures or by drawing on existing mechanisms such as the Regional Skills Partnership Boards and cluster groups. We are also keen not to duplicate the strong relationships tertiary education providers already have with employers across Wales, from multinational companies to local social enterprises and the public sector.

13. Medr is developing relationships with Business Wales to understand employer needs and requests. We will also be commissioning research on how we can widen the range of employers involved in delivering apprenticeships and will use this to inform the design of the new programme. We work with Welsh Government on Apprenticeship Week, which aims to raise the profile of apprenticeships.
14. We recognise there are challenges for smaller businesses in engaging with apprenticeships. We are working with the Federation of Small Businesses to explore how we might be able to raise awareness of apprenticeships among this part of the business community, and also to understand more about the barriers such employers face. Employers can access shared apprenticeships if they aren't able to employ an apprentice on a full time basis or offer all aspects which are included in a framework. Shared apprenticeships enable individuals to work across several employers, and this is particularly beneficial for micro, small and medium sized enterprises. Shared apprenticeships are available across all regions of Wales in all sectors with schemes running in construction, engineering, creative and digital media, technical theatre and community sports. We are exploring whether the scheme can be widened to include green skills.

Information about apprenticeships

15. The importance of high quality, independent, unbiased careers advice for learners and of collaboration with employers around information about vocational options were key themes from respondents during Medr's Strategic Plan consultation. It is critical is that those advising learners have a broad understanding of both current and evolving industry areas and all the education pathways that can support a learner entering into their preferred career or industry. Careers Wales plays a key role in this space, though their activity has been limited by budget restrictions, and it will be important to maximise the opportunities of the careers and work-related experiences pillar of the Curriculum for Wales.
16. We see the inclusion of work experience in further education post-16 programmes of learning as providing learners with highly beneficial real industry exposure. Medr currently provides additional funding to support this in colleges, in response to the recommendations of the [Transitions to Employment](#) report. However, recognising the geography of Wales and the high proportion of micro, small and medium sized enterprises, we have not made it compulsory for every learner, as we recognise that this would be challenging for both tertiary providers and employers to resource.

Equity of support and access

17. A key theme of Medr's strategic plan is to understand and try to address the barriers to participation across all forms of tertiary education, not just apprenticeships.
18. We are commissioning research to collate good practice across Wales, the UK and the world on improving diversity within apprenticeships, and this will inform the design of the new programme, recognising that more needs to be done in this space.
19. Currently, Medr provides an Employer Incentive Scheme to support the recruitment of disabled people onto apprenticeships. This provides £2000 per apprentice for personal or technical support. 489 apprentices have been supported since the scheme began in

2021. Supported apprenticeships, which provide intensive support for those least likely to be able to access the workforce, are in demand, and we are planning to increase the budget available for this provision, to reduce waiting lists. We have seen a slight increase in the number of disabled apprentices: in the last quarter for which we have data (February - April 2024), 12% were disabled, compared to 11% in the same quarter of the previous year, and the figure has been gradually rising over the life of the current programme.

20. Employers play an important role in supporting their apprentices, by giving them time to complete the necessary off-the-job learning, and providing appropriate support and development opportunities within the workplace.

Welsh Government's role

21. The creation of Medr has meant a refresh and reset of the relationship between Welsh Government and the new funding and regulatory body, and we are working with them to ensure there is clarity about respective responsibilities. Welsh Government's role is to set national priorities for skills and the policy direction for apprenticeships. Medr is responsible for the management and oversight of the apprenticeship contract, ensuring that this responds to the Welsh Government's direction of travel. Medr holds the direct relationship with the ten prime contractors, while Estyn will continue to inspect the quality of apprenticeship provision.
22. In addition to the formal relationship between Welsh Government and Medr as an arms-length body, we meet regularly with officials responsible for skills and apprenticeships policy. We are working with them to understand the implications of other policies and developments, including the creation of Skills England and the UK Government's Industrial Strategy, for the apprenticeship programme and wider tertiary education system.
23. The objectives of the Welsh Government's apprenticeship policy statement inform the approaches we are taking in our work programme. By putting in place a more structured programme of framework reviews, with embedded consideration of digital and green skills, this will ensure apprenticeships contribute to a sustainable economy and address skills shortages. We are working with providers to improve the diversity of those taking up apprenticeships, and considering where we can use the opportunity of the creation of Medr to take a more tertiary approach to policy challenges such as the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan and increase provision through the medium of Welsh.
24. Medr's role is to respond to skills priorities as set by Welsh Government and to work in partnership with Regional Skills Partnerships to interpret labour market information and occupational trends data. We then have an oversight role to work with tertiary education providers collectively to ensure provision and curriculum planning is informed by this intelligence and to support innovation in delivery to respond to changes in the economy. Currently, the data is relatively short term, and a longer forward look would help guide provision towards future needs. The creation of Medr with responsibility across tertiary education and research is also an opportunity to join up how the needs of innovative businesses (those that are putting into practice the knowledge generated by our universities) are served by the skills system.

Medr

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