

Enterprise and Business Committee

APP03

Inquiry into Apprenticeships

Evidence from Working Links

Sian Phipps
Committee Clerk
Enterprise and Business Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

April 3rd 2012

Dear Sian

Inquiry into Apprenticeships – Response from Working Links

Working Links is grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to submit evidence to the inquiry.

Working Links Wales is the largest single provider of employment related services in Wales. Since we began in 2000, we've helped over 30,000 people across some of Wales' most deprived communities to change their lives through access to employment and skills opportunities. We also work with hundreds of employers to meet their recruitment needs, helping to create an environment for growth and investment through a skilled and flexible workforce.

Working Links has a role to play in apprenticeship schemes in Wales due to our mandate to support people into employment. We refer individuals to apprenticeship schemes on a regular basis and see work-based training as a key lever to lower unemployment in Wales. We believe that apprenticeships represent a key tool in tackling youth unemployment by providing practical entry pathways into sustainable employment for young people. We acknowledge the efforts being undertaken by the Welsh Government to boost and enhance apprenticeship provision.

In July 2011, we published *'Learning a Living; Apprenticeships and Youth Unemployment in 2012'*, the research, undertaken on a UK wide basis, made a series of recommendations to the UK Government in relation to apprenticeships which we believe also apply in Wales:

- We recommended that the Welsh Government should embed employability in the curriculum and link mainstream education to the world of work.

- We recommended that the Welsh Government should fund more pre-apprenticeship training, and access to apprenticeships should be better linked to the Work Programme to help young people who are long-term unemployed.
- We recommended that government should continue its efforts to promote the benefits of an apprenticeship to young people.
- We recommend that schools should explain the full vocational education offer (including apprenticeships) to young people.

We have the following issues with the way in which apprenticeships are managed and promoted at present:

- There are not sufficient apprenticeships to go around. For most openly advertised apprenticeships, there is at least a 30 to 1 application rate and private companies such as British Gas can get more than 300 applicants for a single position. The Welsh Government should seek avenues through which it can increase the provision of Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships in areas where there is a clear need.
- There are significant marketing issues. In our experience, employers, especially small businesses which make up the backbone of the Welsh economy, are not aware of the potential benefits of taking on apprentices. We believe the Welsh Government and schools could do more to promote the significant economic benefits taking on an apprentice can bring, notwithstanding the significant avenues of funding that are often available to employers through schemes such as 'Young Recruits'. However, we also see a patchy uptake of apprenticeships across various sectors and employers, some sectors are far better at promoting and taking on apprentices than others.
- The structure of apprenticeships is complex and difficult to understand. Reforms to the overall structure and streamlining of the application and awarding processes could enhance access, take-up and completion of apprenticeships. We think it may be illustrative for the committee to look at the application process as 'consumers'.
- We are also concerned that there is a perception that apprenticeship schemes are placing the burden of 'remedial education', to correct mistakes made during schooling or otherwise, on business rather than Government. In particular, issues relating to individuals standards of literacy and numeracy are a core part of the apprenticeship framework but we believe that these should be embedded within the BTEch and QCF qualifications and ideally should not need to be substantially revisited as stand-alone modules within the apprenticeship framework. There is on the other hand a perception amongst employers that we have engaged with that those emerging from apprenticeships often have better 'soft skills' than those with more traditional academic qualifications. At present, schools are judged by their grades, rather than their ability to produce rounded individuals with a good work ethic who are ready to head into the world of employment and contribute to the Welsh



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economy.

- Fundamentally, we believe work based learning programmes, such as apprenticeships should be based on good quality labour market statistics. Without accurate and frequently updated labour market statistics we will not know where skills and apprenticeships may be required in the wider economy. This requires curricula and education policy to be flexible and responsive to shifts in the labour market. It also requires a joined up approach when looking at future education policy between Welsh Government, the Welfare to Work providers, Sector Skills Councils, Jobcentre Plus and the education system at all levels (schools, FE and Work Based Learning) - we are not currently in this position. Doing this would require Welsh Government and the other organisations to be highly proactive in revisiting provision on a regular basis and promoting courses that fit with labour market demands. The Construction sector has been, in our experience, particularly good at doing this in the past.
- The Welsh Government should seek to ensure that provision of apprenticeships is closely aligned to its other policy priorities, in particular the Economic Renewal Programme and the development of Enterprise Zones across Wales. The Enterprise Zones will have highly specific skills needs and the Welsh Government will need to ensure that these needs can be met as readily as possible if the Enterprise Zones are to be a success. However, the proposed concentration of industries in particular localities also offers opportunities to create highly focussed training opportunities in those areas working with local schools, FE institutions and Work Based Learning providers.
- We welcome the 'shared apprenticeship' scheme and believe this will offer substantial opportunities to increase the number of apprenticeships available in Wales and extend apprenticeships to sectors where there have traditionally been relatively few. In particular, shared apprenticeships will also assist person in seasonal occupations – such as tourism/hospitality and construction – to find work placements to fit their framework requirements.
- The apprenticeship matching service is a welcome development, and we think the scheme could be very successful in enhancing employers' ability to find suitable recruits. However, the success of the schemes will rely on effective partnership between Careers Wales, Job Centre Plus and organisations such as us.
- There are issues in the education system with the targeting of apprentices, we feel that the early promotion of apprentices could increase access and take up as well as potentially lowering the risk of school leavers leaving education without qualifications. It is generally felt in education that apprenticeships are for young people who are not academically inclined which in the case of most apprenticeships, is wholly inaccurate and does not reflect the economic and social value that apprenticeships offer. In research we carried out on a UK Wide basis in 2011 we found that 25% of young



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people thought that apprenticeships were only for those with low skills, on the other hand 91% of employers we interviewed thought that apprenticeships should be aspirational goals for young people. We feel careers advice services and schools should be doing more to promote apprenticeships as a viable, high quality career path for young people from an early age.

- We see issues with the take up of apprenticeship schemes tied to means testing for benefits, and whilst this is not within the powers of Welsh Government it is a key issue for increasing uptake, particularly amongst young people in deprived communities where there may be generational unemployment. If a household income is reliant on means tested benefits, the uptake of an apprenticeship can often have perceived negative consequences for the future income of the household, if not actual negative consequences. This must be tackled by Government and guidance should be clearer on the potential positive or negative financial impact of undertaking an apprenticeship.

Working Links is keen to promote and enhance uptake of apprenticeships in Wales. It is our view that apprenticeships can be a key lever to drive forward employability and support business in Wales. We are committed to collaborative working to take forward the apprenticeships agenda, and it is through working together with partners that we see the opportunities offered by apprenticeships being maximised.



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