



**National Assembly for Wales
Submission of Written Evidence by Kronospan Limited**

Apprenticeships in Wales

Enterprise & Business Committee : 16th May 2012

Introduction:

Kronospan is a wood panel product manufacturing organisation that has 29 plants in 25 countries across the world. The business employs around 11,000 people, with a turnover of over €3Billion, and is the number one player in its market sector.

Kronospan's UK base in Chirk, Wrexham, was established in 1970, and has been producing wood-based panel products since 1973. We are therefore a long term inward investor in Wales.

The organisation has continually re-invested in its operations, to the extent that it is now one of the largest industrial employers in North East Wales, one of the top ten manufacturing sites in Wales (Top 300 Companies in Wales 2010). We are one of only four manufacturers of our kind in mainland UK. With over 600 direct employees our business supports over 4,000 further jobs in the supply chain and local economy, many of these in rural areas.

Nine years ago, Kronospan took on its first six apprentices, a change in strategy implemented in order to address:-

- poor UK skillbase compared to our other plants in Europe
- age profile of our existing workforce and
- overcome ongoing recruitment difficulties – no-one training anyone.

The company aims to recruit up to six engineering apprentices a year, with many more applicants than positions due to the high regard that the company's apprenticeship programme has in the area.

Kronospan won the Large Employer of the Year award at Apprenticeship Awards Cymru 2011.

The company provides a wide range of support to its apprentices and offers apprenticeships to mature individuals who are not in a position to return to college full-time.

Over the nine years, the company has recruited 35 young apprentices. Many of these are being further developed to become engineers, team leaders and mentors of the future.

Additionally, Kronospan has provided the following 'mature' apprenticeship opportunities to existing employees:

- 20 Engineering Apprenticeships
- 26 Management Apprenticeships
- 5 Customer Service Apprenticeships

In answer to the terms of reference of the enquiry, brief summary answers are provided below, together with some other observations.

1. Is the current apprenticeship system providing effective support to the Welsh economy?

Most large businesses recognise the value of a structured apprenticeship scheme. We are of the opinion that the term “apprenticeship” is too loosely used, and can in some ways devalue what is on offer.

The schemes that are operating in industry have been driven by commercial logic, and to some extent frustration at the quality and experience of people that are produced by the education system.

2. Is the current apprenticeship system meeting the current and future skills needs of employers in Wales?

It is clear that the large company schemes are self sufficient and provide a return on the investment made. More work needs to take place to encourage and incentivise SME's to invest in the future through running joint apprenticeship schemes.

3. With increased priority on apprenticeships for 16-24 year olds, are apprenticeships an attractive option for young people?

Yes. A well run scheme provides the opportunity for entry to the world of work with continuing learning, and the potential to establish a responsible role in industry that is of an equal or better status than would be offered to a raw Graduate without industrial experience.

4. Do the systems for establishing Apprenticeship Standards & frameworks and recruiting Apprentices work effectively?

In our opinion we can operate effectively within the Standards and framework that exist.

Given the size of the business, our contact with standard setting bodies has been extremely limited, so we have not influenced the outcomes.

Our prime motive is to ensure that we provide our business with high level skills that allow us to compete, and in reality our own programme goes significantly beyond the basic requirements.

Recruitment methods:

- 1) Careers Wales Website is a poor website for employers (log on issues, useless application format, etc). By comparison, Go Wales (graduates) site is much more effective.

- 2) Jobcentre Plus website is effective, but not necessarily seen as a route for school leavers to apply for advanced apprenticeship vacancies.
- 3) Our own direct local advertising, participation with local feeder schools, and referrals from FE colleges have been the principal recruitment routes.

Other observations:

Schools:

- 1) Our observation is that there are different degrees of enthusiasm and understanding from careers & teaching staff as to whether engineering apprenticeships are the right option for talented engineering students. There has been a shift towards continuing education, rather than channelling young people into the world of work, which sometimes appears to be portrayed as a second best option.

WAG could assist by ensuring that talented engineering students are suitably informed of the value and benefits of apprenticeship schemes **prior** to the student choosing his or her options. This should be applied consistently at all schools.

- 2) WAG must ensure schools have sufficient engineering equipment to enable students to fully benefit from undertaking practical engineering based subjects, not just theory.

Greater interaction between Schools and technical courses at FE colleges would be beneficial, to give young people the opportunity to maximise their potential.

- 3) Given that students undertake an HNC qualification in years 3 & 4 of our apprenticeship, the advanced apprenticeship scheme requires applicants who are both practically and academically talented, Schools must engage with 'hand-on' students to illustrate the importance of at least 5 A-C's, specifically in Maths, English, Science and a related subject such as Engineering, D&T etc. So many would be applicants cannot meet this basic criteria.
- 4) Education / Industry links need further strengthening. Teachers of engineering subjects must spend time at manufacturing/engineering companies to keep abreast of latest developments and techniques?

FE Colleges:

- 1) We recognise that our local providers have made great efforts to focus on the requirements of industry.
- 2) The merger between Deeside & Yale Colleges – as a South Wrexham employer, it is critical that Yale continue to provide the courses in the



Wrexham travel to work area. It is not feasible to send an apprentice 30 miles to Deeside, full time at the age of 16.

- 3) In 2011, without any prior consultation, Glyndwr University suspended their HNC in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering courses. The company was forced to send our students up to Deeside College – a 60+ mile round journey. So far this has proved to be workable, but only because the current batch of students have driving licences and cars. This will not always be the case.
- 4) We have been informed that Yale College may be granted a licence to provide the HNC Engineering Courses. This would be the ideal outcome for us.