

Response to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee on Apprenticeship Pathways

Medr welcomes the opportunity to provide the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee with evidence to inform its inquiry into Apprenticeship pathways.

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. This includes:

- further education
- higher education including research and innovation
- adult community learning and work-based education
- apprenticeships
- local authority maintained school sixth-forms

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.

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 also takes account of the legislative requirements placed on us in the [Tertiary Education and Research \(Wales\) Act 2022](#). 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.

Welsh Government has transferred responsibility for management of the existing Apprenticeship contracts to Medr under the Section 83 agreement put in place in August 2024. The commencement of the apprenticeships provisions in Part 4 and Section 104 (financial support for apprenticeships) of the Tertiary Education and Research (TER) Act is due to transfer relevant functions to Medr in July 2027. At the same time, the Welsh Government will replace the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for Wales (SASW), which sets out the minimum requirements of apprenticeship frameworks in Wales, with the Welsh Apprenticeship Specification (WAS). This will align with the commissioning of the next apprenticeship programme, to run from August 2027.

This submission provides background briefing for the Committee clarifying Medr's responsibilities for apprenticeships. We intend to provide a further public submission which will set out Medr's position on the issues raised in the Terms of Reference.

1. Pathways between apprenticeship levels

Medr is responsible for the operational policy and delivery of apprenticeships across Wales. We fulfil this role in the context of our remit for all tertiary education provision and therefore view apprenticeships as part of the wider tertiary education system, as one route for meeting the needs of employers and the economy.

Responsibility on delivering Junior Apprenticeships will transfer from Welsh Government to Medr early in the New Year. Junior Apprenticeships is not a traditional apprenticeship but a form of vocational education and training for 14-16 year old. Junior Apprenticeships offer year 10 and 11 pupils the opportunity to study full-time for a future career, in a college setting, from the age of 14. They function as a two-year programme of work-related education with work experience built in, alongside a Level 2 course that is equivalent to four or five GCSEs, in a range of different vocational pathways. Each apprentice also studies GCSEs in Maths and English alongside their chosen area. Each Junior Apprentice should have access to support with teaching and learning, help with behaviour management, and a designated Welfare Officer to support day to day issues and provide pastoral care. The aim of the Junior Apprenticeship is to make the learner employable or ready to progress onto a higher-level vocational course or apprenticeship at the age of 16.

Apprentices gain work experience, learn new skills and gain a nationally recognised qualification while earning a wage. This is completed through an apprenticeship framework, which sets out the programme of learning and qualifications from level 2 up to degree level. There are 23 apprenticeship frameworks across all sectors in Wales. The frameworks are delivered through two sources:

- Levels 2 – 5 apprenticeships are delivered by 10 contracted learning providers (6 further education colleges and 4 independent training providers) across Wales. The providers were appointed through a public procurement exercise. Each provider has subcontracting arrangements in place which may include other colleges in consortia arrangements. The contracts were awarded from August 2021 up to July 2027.
- Degree apprenticeships at level 6 are delivered by 8 universities in Wales (including the Open University) and are grant funded under separate arrangements. Degree apprenticeships are available in digital, engineering, advanced manufacturing and construction.

Medr is committed to working towards creating a tertiary education system where learners receive the highest-quality provision, with clearer and more flexible pathways. One of our key priorities is to ensure apprentices gain the skills, knowledge and qualifications they need to progress within their chosen career, whilst responding to the changing economy skills needs. Increasing progression from lower level to higher level apprenticeships is paramount to this.

2. Economy

Medr is responsible for developing and issuing apprenticeship frameworks in Wales. Responsibility for the regulation of qualifications which form a compulsory part of each framework sits with Qualifications Wales.

Apprenticeships are a key driver to raise skill levels, drive productivity and help grow a skilled and diverse workforce that is fit for purpose. There are growing demands for new skills and upskilling as a result of new technologies, artificial intelligence and our transition to a net zero economy.

Medr is working to identify how we can respond to these growing demands in a more agile and responsive way to ensure the right qualifications and skills are delivered to meet employer, learner and economy needs. Medr has developed a programme of work to review all apprenticeship frameworks to ensure they meet the economy and learner needs. An apprenticeship framework sets out the programme of learning and qualifications from level 2 up to degree level, which includes qualifications, essential skills and on the job learning. Over the next three years the 23 apprenticeship frameworks will be reviewed to ensure they meet the economy and learner needs. The framework review process includes the establishment of a steering group (consisting of sector experts, technical experts, industry bodies and key partners, such as Qualifications Wales) to inform the development of the frameworks, public consultations to ensure the frameworks meet industry and learner needs and quality assurance. This process could create new frameworks, such as the proposed Renewable Energy framework which will be developed in 2025, or consolidate existing frameworks. The Apprenticeship Frameworks will then be published on the Welsh Government's apprenticeship framework library.

The framework reviews will ensure our frameworks can respond to the rapidly changing skills needs going forward. Green and digital skills are key themes throughout all the reviews. All reviews will be delivered with the apprentices' progression throughout the levels (level 2 up to degree apprenticeships) being considered from the outset. This will enable learners to progress more effectively and seamlessly through the levels and will remove duplicated/repeated learning.

We are working with Welsh Government and the Regional Skills Partnerships to identify and address our key sector priorities, this includes supporting the Welsh Government deliver its Apprenticeship Policy Statement.

3. Employers

Medr has committed to developing strong links with business, industry, Regional Skills Partnerships, Corporate Joint Committees and employers to understand the skills needed for a productive workforce.

The contracted apprenticeship providers and universities work with employers directly to create apprenticeship opportunities and recruit apprentices across all sectors in Wales.

The contracted apprenticeship programme provides dedicated funding to employers to recruit disabled people. The Incentive Scheme (EIS) provides financial support of £2,000 to employers to help provide opportunities for disabled apprentices.

In addition to financial support, we deliver supported apprenticeships. They provide additional support to disabled apprentices with intensive and wide-ranging employment and learning needs to access and complete an apprenticeship. Support provided may be through job coaching or other specialist resource.

Employers who may not be able to employ an apprentice on a full time basis can take advantage of the shared apprenticeship model. Apprentices can gain qualifications across a number of employers rather than being employed by a sole employer through the shared apprenticeships model. This is particularly beneficial for micro businesses and SMEs.

However, there is a need to widen the employer base. Medr is exploring options to understand the barriers employers face, especially SMEs, on taking on apprentices and how to increase the employer base going forward. Our engagement with the Regional Skills Partnerships is focused on understanding the skills needs and priorities in each region, to inform tertiary planning and provision so that the needs of individuals, employers and the local economy are met.

4. Information about apprenticeships

Sharing good practices to promote apprenticeships and meaningful work experience is a collaborative responsibility across our key partners. Medr is committed to working with these partners, including Welsh Government, Careers Wales, and tertiary education providers to encourage more learners to access the right advice and guidance to support their transition into apprenticeships.

There are already significant good practices across Wales of collaborative working. We will learn from these good practices and build upon them to strengthen our network. However, there is more we can do to ensure learners and employers have the right information to make an informed choice on the skills they need to progress in their chosen occupations. The importance of high quality, independent, unbiased careers advice for learners and the importance of collaboration with employers around vocational options was a theme from respondents during Medr's Strategic Plan consultation.

Medr is aware of the recommendations in Hefin David's Transition to Employment Report and recognises the opportunities we have in addressing some of the recommendations to improve work experience in Wales. Medr will work with Welsh Government to explore the scope for taking them forward.

5. Equity of support and access for learners

Medr is committed to ensuring our all age apprenticeship programme is inclusive to all, including disabled people, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic people, women and those with low skills across all sectors in Wales. Medr will continue to encourage young people onto apprenticeships as part of the Welsh Government's Young Person's Guarantee.

One of Medr's key priorities is to support creating a positive future for the tertiary education sector and for Wales, and will do so through continuous improvement, including more equitable opportunities. We will continue to seek opportunities to improve the uptake of apprenticeships from people with protected characteristics.

Medr monitors data to understand how delivery is performing and will consider whether interventions would be helpful.

The Employment and Enterprise Bureaus, funded by Medr and operated by 12 FE colleges, support learners by providing advice and guidance and developing employability and enterprise skills. The Bureaus help to build links between learners and employers, through a range of activities such as careers fairs, employer information sessions, employers providing advice on opportunities in their sector. These relationships can lead to the creation of work experience opportunities or apprenticeships.

6. The Welsh Government's role

Medr will work collaboratively with the Welsh Government to respond to the skills priorities it sets. Medr is responsible for the operational policy and delivery of apprenticeships across Wales. This includes transforming the Welsh Government's Apprenticeship Policy Statement into deliverable actions to meet learner and economy needs.

Medr is responsible for the development and issuing of all apprenticeship frameworks in Wales from level 2 up to degree level, which includes qualifications, essential skills and on the job learning. Welsh Government has delegated the role of Apprenticeship Issuing Authority in Wales to Medr. The key role of the Issuing Authority is to quality assure the frameworks to make sure they meet industry standards and meet the requirements set out in the legislation – the Specification for Apprenticeship Standards for Wales (SASW).

Medr is responsible for managing and funding the apprenticeship contracted providers and the universities that deliver degree apprenticeships, working within the budget envelope set out by Welsh Government.

Medr will design future apprenticeship provision to respond to the Welsh Government's skills priorities and to meet the needs of learners, employers and the economy. Over the next few months Medr will commence extensive engagement with learning providers, industry, employers, stakeholders, apprentices and wider to inform the development of the new apprenticeship programme, which is due to start in August 2027. This will involve research and

evaluation of the existing programme, which will include the current delivery model and performance/outcomes across all sectors. We will also look at good and bad practices within Wales and across the UK/world. By the end of 2025 Medr will have developed the New Apprenticeship Programme's strategic visions and aims and objectives.

The outcome of the committee's inquiry will help inform the development of the future apprenticeship programme in Wales.