

Cross-Party Group on Apprenticeships
Wednesday 18 September 2024
Conference Room C&D, Ty Hywel

In Attendance:

Attendees (Registered Members - In person):

Andrew Cornish	CEO / Principal	Coleg Sir Gar / Coleg Ceredigion
Nicola Gamlin	Principal	Coleg Gwent
Sarah John	Director	ACT/ALS Training
Mark Jones	CEO	Gower College Swansea
Ceri Murphy	Managing Director	Itec Training Solutions Ltd
Jonathan Morgan	Principal	Coleg y Cymoedd
John Nash	Chair	NTFW
Grant Santos	CEO	Educ8 Training Group
Richard Spear	Managing Director	ACT
Lisa Thomas	Principal	The Coleg Merthyr
Barry Walters	Principal	Pembrokeshire College

Attendees (Registered Members - Online):

Viv Buckley	Principal and Chief Executive	Bridgend College
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Attendees (Representatives - In person):

Kelly Fountain	Principal	Gower College Swansea
Jude Holloway	Managing Director	Educ8 Training Group
Sharon James Evans	Principal	Cardiff and Vale College
Catherine Lewis	Principal /DCEO	NPTC Group of Colleges
Angela Maguire-Lewis	Director of Governance	Cambrian Training Company
Gareth Matthews	Director	Itec Training Solutions Ltd
Faith O'Brien	Managing Director	Cambrian Training Company
Nicola Thornton-Scott	Assistant Principal Work-Based Learning	NPTC Group of Colleges
Berni Tyler	Director of the WBL Consortium and Employer Relations	Pembrokeshire College

Attendees (Guests - In person):

Harriet Barnes	Director Research, Innovation and Skills	Medr
Heather Davidson	Head of Apprenticeships	Medr
Rhian Edwards	Executive Director for Policy	Medr
Lucy Morgan	Senior Researcher - post-16 education and skills	Senedd Research, Welsh Parliament
Simon Pirotte OBE	Chief Executive Officer	Medr

Attendees (Secretariat - In person):

Rachel Cable	Director of Policy and Public Affairs	ColegauCymru/CollegesWales
Kelly Edwards	Director of Development	ColegauCymru/CollegesWales
Dave Hagendyk	Chief Executive	ColegauCymru/CollegesWales
Lucy Hopkins	Communications Manager	ColegauCymru/CollegesWales
Billy Jones	Communications and Research Officer	Senedd, Office of Luke Fletcher MS
Lisa Mytton	Strategic Director	NTfW
Jeff Protheroe	Strategic Adviser for Work-based Learning and Employability	ColegauCymru/CollegesWales
Karen Smith	Communications and Marketing Manager	NTfW

Apologies (Registered members):

Luke Fletcher MS		
Hefin David MS		
Mark Dacey	Principal/CEO	NPTC Group of Colleges
Mike James	CEO	CAVC Group
Arwyn Watkins	Executive Chair of CTC Group	Cambrian Training Company
Yanina Williams	Chief Executive	Coleg Cambria

Apologies (Members to be registered):

Kathryn Robson	Chief Executive	Adult Learning Wales
Aled Jones-Griffith	Chief Executive Officer	Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
Geraint Williams	Head	St Davids Catholic College

Item	Action
1	<p>Welcome and Apologies</p> <p>Joyce Watson MS (JW) welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were given by the secretariat, noted and accepted.</p>
2	<p>Short welcome by ColegauCymru and NTfW</p> <p>Dr Barry Walters (BW) as Chair of the ColegauCymru Strategic Work-based Learning and Employability Group, and Lisa Mytton (LM) Strategic Director, NTfW opened up the meeting by outlining their positive experiences of working with Medr to-date, and their aspiration for a continuation of the collaborative approach moving forward.</p>
3	<p>Medr's Vision for Apprenticeships in Wales</p> <p>Simon Pirotte OBE (SP), Chief Executive of Medr, welcomed the opportunity to engage in discussion with the CPG, introduced himself and his colleagues present to the group, and provided the following opening remarks:</p> <p>Medr recognises and would echo the words in Barry's and Lisa's opening remarks about inspiring the skills of the future workforce. Wales is small and agile enough to allow everyone involved to get closer to the decision making process. Medr is only six weeks old, and much of the work to-date has been about getting the culture of the organisation right. All within Medr are also looking to ensure a smooth transition in the operations side of the organisation – noted that one of the first tasks was</p>

	<p>to ensure all providers were paid over the summer period, which was achieved. Medr has already taken forward much of the legislation agenda from HEFCW, but more is due to follow.</p> <p>SP continued to outline his personal passion for apprenticeships and reflected on his own (previous) experience as an apprenticeship provider, and the positive experiences of working collaboratively within a work-based learning consortium – something which he would wish to see continued in his new role. SP also outlined what he saw as the transformative nature of apprenticeships.</p> <p>SP outlined that Welsh Government will decide the overall budget and policy direction for the Apprenticeships Programme in Wales, but that Medr will take forward the future apprenticeship programme design, noting that the public consultation on the Medr Strategic Plan will be published soon.</p> <p>With regards to ‘what is the purpose of Medr’ SP explained that he saw it as an organisation that would join the dots across the whole post-16 system but noting that all within it would need to have respect for other elements of it outside of their own, and that the fact that there are still high numbers of NEETs and low participation rates should be a major concern for all.</p>
4	<p>‘In conversation with Medr’</p> <p>The Chair led a discussion between group members and Medr representatives, based on points that group members wished to see raised. The following was discussed:</p> <p>Engaging individuals</p> <p>JW asked how all apprentices can have equal status. SP replied by stating that it is about the individual, and that flexible and progressive pathways, involving employers, was key. SP noted that speaking with NUS recently, they recognised that they do not represent all learners equally, but it is felt that a universal ‘Learner engagement Code will help. Rhian Edwards (RE) updated everyone on the fact that Medr will be recruiting a Learner Voice lead.</p> <p>Richard Spear (RS) raised the fact that previously there was a centrally coordinated ‘Learner Voice Survey’, which was dropped because of resource issues. Some providers have continued to provide independently. RS went on to say that Medr will be holding a great deal of data on learners, and that this data needs to be made available to all, so that providers can better benchmark their own performance. RE stated that Medr would welcome discussion with providers on how best transparent data can be captured and used.</p> <p>SP stated that he would like to see Medr ‘data informed, and not necessarily data led’</p> <p>Harriet Barnes (HB) informed the group that Medr are working closely with Welsh Government colleagues to ensure that there is no duplication of effort when it comes to data capture across the tertiary sector. SP supported by saying that Medr are discussing internally about the various data sets already available.</p> <p>Dave Hagendyk (DH) asked where did Medr see apprenticeships sit within the overall post-16 system, noting that currently, colleges are reporting an increase in demand in vocational courses, especially at the lower levels, adding – is there a role for a ‘pre-apprenticeship’ programme? RE responded by stating that Medr does need to consider pre-16 and employability provision, and that Medr intends to work closely with the Welsh Government to ensure a smooth transition for learners progressing. VCSEs will be key to this. SP went on to say that he is a supporter of Junior Apprenticeships, but the line is drawn at 16 for Medr’s role. However, the Minister (for FE and HE) is keen on developing 14 – 19 Pathways.</p>

Engaging Employers

The Chair stated that employers are key to developing the apprenticeships offer, and that we all need to demystify apprenticeships for young people, their teachers and parents. John Nash (JN) agreed with this, stating that there is a perpetual issue with 'parity of esteem' and employers are crucial to breaking this down. JN went on to say that Careers Fairs and apprenticeship provider presence in schools are a good solution.

RE added that Employer Voice is also key, pointing to discussion internally at Medr on how they can assist in involving employers in the discussion and development of the whole post-16 offer inc. apprenticeships. Again, Medr would be happy to work with provider colleagues on how best this can be achieved.

Grant Santos (GS) outlined that it is important to engage SMEs in any discussion, and not just the larger, easier to reach, employers. He also agreed with the Chair's comment on needing to demystify the apprenticeships offer for young people, their teachers and parents, and employers.

Dr Andrew Cornish (AC) outlined that his college (Coleg Sir Gâr) is beginning to see a big increase in individuals choosing an apprenticeship, over more traditional routes such as university. This is being seen in areas such as agriculture, and more and more at the higher levels (or apprenticeship). AC asked the group – how do we maximise the 'earn as you learn' message. HB responded by saying the coherent learner pathways needed to be developed and understood by all.

AC continued by reminding the group of the recently published Review of Vocational Qualification, conducted by Sharon Lusher, and raised the question 'what is the skills strategy for Wales'? SP responded by stating that it is known that future funding is going to be tight, but it has to be recognised that everyone should have equal access to opportunities.

Nicola Thornton-Scott (NT-S) added that it is not just the end point that needs to be considered, it is also the starting point – indicating that there have recently been issues in construction, with the changes to the apprenticeship frameworks, and the qualifications therein. NT-S provided further context by saying that there is an increase in individuals withdrawing early from the apprenticeship in construction, as the level of work is greater than what is expected. There is no stepping stone at Level 2, and it would be good to see data on the impact of such a change. With the advent of Medr, it is now unknown who 'owns' this issue. Everyone needs to remember that it is not all about higher-level skills. NT-S finished by supporting GS's earlier comments, around the importance in engaging SMEs and micro-businesses in the discussion around skills.

RE responded by stating the risk that the apprenticeships programme is seen as the answer to all skills needs i.e. in the foundational economy, with higher-level skills, with Degree Apprenticeships etc. and added that Medr does not operate independently of the overall system.

Sarah John (SJ) raised the issue of not losing sight of the aims of the Credit Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and the inherent ability to Recognise Prior Learning (RPL), which would allow for a more efficient use of funding, particularly within a wider tertiary model, which should make it easier to do and manage.

Mark Jones (MJ) asked the question – What can Medr do to encourage informed learner choices? SP responded by stating that Medr is currently speaking with colleagues in Careers Wales to answer such a question. There is a role for Medr to play, but it cannot accept the sole responsibility.

Future Commissioning

JN welcomed Medr's aspiration for ensuring a smooth transition from the previous system to the current, but a discussion is needed about the future commissioning of the apprenticeships programme. What might the future model look like? SP responded by stating that Medr are discussing with Welsh Government the possibility of extending the current contract, which will give Medr time and space to have a detailed discussion with all involved. RE added that Medr are keen to ensure that there are no unintended consequences with such a move. NT-S made the point that all of the commissioning processes to-date have caused great instability for providers, learners, and employers, and through each of the recent rounds of procurement, the impact has been worse each time. RE acknowledged the point and stated that Welsh Government is not far from a decision, and that they are looking to bring in additional resource to develop an approach to future commissioning.

Levels of monitoring and control in apprenticeships delivery

MJ raised the issue around a consistent approach (across the post-16 sector) to provider monitoring and performance management. SP agreed, stating that Medr needs some time to arrive at such a consistent approach that meets the needs of all. Processes can be complex and there are sensitivities and unintended consequences to consider when making changes. Time and dialogue will allow all to arrive at an optimal system. RE added that it would be good for Medr to understand this issue further i.e. a comparison of what is being required across the various strands of post-16 provision.

Skills England

The Chair raised the question around Skills England. HB informed the group that the proposals are on Medr's radar, and that they are being briefed regularly by Welsh Government colleagues, who are leading on the inter-governmental discussions. HB noted the concerns around the proposed changes to the apprenticeships levy, but that all that can be done is to influence and not control. RE added that Medr is looking at what is happening in Scotland too, and that both England and Scotland are looking at what is happening (and has happened) in Wales also.

RS made a plea to Medr colleagues, stating that everyone recognises that the current system is sub-optimal, and that most of the issues raised are based on anecdote. As Medr looks towards the future, can we all agree to properly define the problem before we discuss and agree any solutions? SP responded by agreeing and added that it has taken decades to create the problems we face, so we are unlikely to solve them immediately – it is this that SP sees as the purpose of Medr. SP went on to add that he sees this as a leadership challenge for the whole sector and would ask everyone to look beyond their own institutions when arriving at potential solutions.

AC raised the issue around the whole education sector (pre and post-16) stating that there is already a significant amount of data at L2 (i.e. school level data)

Managing employer demand

The Chair asked the question around the identification of future workforce needs, stating that to identify future skills, and the same time as delivering against current demand is a challenge, and that careers information advice and guidance is key. BW supported the Chair's comments, outlining the experiences of the energy sector in Pembrokeshire, whereby they do not necessarily know what skills are required in the future. If employers do not know, it is even more difficult for providers to know. The Chair went on to ask – How is Medr planning to upskill and/or re-skills the existing workforce? SP responded by saying that there is a commitment to lifelong learning. NT-S added that apprenticeships are key within this space, as they offer the flexibility for additional qualifications and/or skills development to be 'bolted-on' to the framework. However, it was noted that future frameworks need to be developed in a more responsive way.

	<p>The celebration of apprentices/apprenticeships</p> <p>James Scorey (JS) and JN both raised the opportunities available in promoting the apprenticeship offer and wider vocational skills, through celebrating the success of individuals who have followed a vocational route, citing the recent Welsh success in WorldSkills and the Apprenticeship Awards Cymru respectively. RE responded by stating that it would be difficult for Medr as the regulator and funder of all post-16 routes to be seen to be favouring one form of provision over another.</p> <p>Closing Remarks</p> <p>In bringing the discussion to a close, LM reminded the group that these are live conversations with Medr, and that continuous dialogue between apprenticeship providers, ColegauCymru/CollegesWales, NTfW, Medr and the Welsh Government are key. From an NTfW perspective, it is hoped that we will continue in the spirit of cooperation.</p> <p>BW reinforced that he welcomed the continued engagement and discussion and re-stated his view that professional and impartial careers advice and guidance at ages 14 – 16 is critical.</p> <p>The Chair brought the meeting to a close by remarking that apprenticeships are hugely important to young people and the economy, and re-iterated BW's point that careers information, advice and guidance is key. In addition, ensuring that apprenticeships are available and accessible to individuals from a range of diverse backgrounds is also important, all of this at a time when there are significant changes in the economy of Wales.</p>
5	<p>Minutes and actions from previous meeting</p> <p>As Luke Fletcher (LF) was unavailable for this meeting, it was felt that it was not possible to agree the previous minutes.</p>
6	<p>Forward Work Plan</p> <p>This was shared with the papers prior to the meeting. Jeff Protheroe (JP) outlined that this would be discussed further with LF and LM after the meeting, and that communication outside of the meeting would follow, with regards to the proposed Apprenticeships Fair as part of Apprenticeships Week '25.</p>
7	<p>Date of next meeting</p> <p>Post Meeting Note: Next meeting will be joint with the CPG on FE and Skills, which is being held on Tue 26 Nov 24 (12.00 - 1.00pm)</p>

	Action Description	Owner