

Work-based learning: apprenticeships

Introduction

The current Welsh Government contract for the delivery of apprenticeship programmes commenced in August 2021.

Ten training providers are commissioned contractors to deliver apprenticeships.

Six of the contracts are delivered by further education colleges and four by independent training providers. These 10 providers work with a range of other training providers using partnership and sub-contracting arrangements to deliver training for programmes at foundation apprenticeship, apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship levels.

Across most learning areas outcomes have improved, although they remain low in health, public services and care and hospitality and catering.

Of the four inspections undertaken, one provider needed follow-up with areas for improvement causing concern.

Learners

46,610

No. of apprenticeship learners
2022-2023

17,480

No. of foundation apprenticeship
learners 2022-2023

20,070

No. of apprenticeship level 3
learners 2022-2023

9,060

No. of higher apprenticeship
learners 2022-2023

Provision

Apprentices are employed and work in a wide range of occupations.

Apprenticeships are available at level 2 (foundation apprenticeship), level 3 (apprenticeship) and level 4 and 5 (higher apprenticeship).

Learners undertaking apprenticeships are full-time members of their employer's staff. Apprenticeship programmes generally take two to three years to complete.

Apprentices enter their training at different levels depending on the job role, their previous experience and the needs of employers. As well as developing their job-related skills in the workplace, apprentices work towards achieving a series of recognised qualifications as part of their apprenticeship frameworks.

Inspections

Core inspections undertaken during 2023-2024: 4

Case studies

Number of case studies: 5

Follow-up

Providers in follow-up: 1

CAVC Apprenticeships
Gower College Swansea
ITEC Training
Cambrian Training

Summary

Most learners develop a wide range of practical and theory skills rapidly as a result of their workplace experiences and supportive teaching, training and assessment. Providers are continually improving their procedures to ensure that learners' well-being needs are identified and quickly met. In general, leaders prioritise well and work effectively with a range of partners.

Learning, teaching and learning experiences

Many learners made at least sound progress in developing a wide range of theory knowledge that helped support their job roles. In most cases, learners developed a comprehensive range of practical skills that they applied to their work roles well. Learners on higher level apprenticeships often linked projects and assignments to their workplaces, which developed their higher-level knowledge and thinking skills and resulted in new practices and procedures for their employer. Learners at all levels quickly became valued members of their employers' staff, contributing well to a wide range of activities and tasks. As a result of their apprenticeships, learners at all levels developed their verbal and written communication skills well. In the best cases, learners used these skills when interacting with their managers and peers and when speaking to customers and clients. However, in our thematic review of delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes we found that the learning and teaching of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in apprenticeships was unhelpfully skewed towards preparation for external assessment.

In the majority of cases, teachers, trainers and assessors had high expectations of their learners. These staff gave high levels of personal support, encouraging and motivating learners to achieve higher standards of practical and theory work. Assessors visited and monitored learners' progress regularly, updating progress tracking records and giving beneficial feedback on written work. In the best cases, assessors negotiated appropriately challenging targets with learners for the completion of written work. Most learners knew the progress they were making and what they needed to do to complete their apprenticeships. All four of the providers inspected developed a comprehensive range of teaching and learning resources to support learners.

In each of the four providers, teachers, trainers and assessors used questioning techniques particularly well. They used questions effectively to check learners' knowledge and understanding and to probe and extend higher level understanding and thinking.

All providers had made progress in developing a beneficial range of bilingual teaching and learning resources. Each provider had increased the capacity of their staff to deliver and assess programmes bilingually. Learners with Welsh language ability conversed confidently in Welsh with Welsh speaking staff assessors. However, the number of learners who chose to do written work or assessments in Welsh remained low.

Across the network, a few learners remained on-programme beyond their expected apprenticeship end dates, with a number of learners well beyond their expected dates. These learners are generally in the health, public services and care and hospitality and catering sectors. Although improving, these sectors generally remain the slowest to fully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. New qualifications in the health, public services and care sectors have now bedded in, but workforce pressures in the sector remain a concern. A key issue identified in our inspections was the lack of time that employers, especially in the health and social care sector, are giving learners to undertake written work or off-the-job learning.

Care, support and guidance and well-being and attitudes to learning

Across the sector, providers and their sub-contractors had a comprehensive range of care, support and guidance procedures and protocols. The support available to learners was wide ranging with learners' well-being being a constant focus. As their first point of contact, learners built strong levels of trust with their assessors. Across the four providers, assessors made regular visits to learners who were at risk of leaving their apprenticeship or behind where they should be for the stage of the programme. As a result, many of these learners remained in training and eventually completed their programmes.

Each of the four providers had a range of support services available to learners. These were generally appropriate to the size and nature of the provider, with further education lead providers having a wide range of in-house support services available. All providers used their available expertise appropriately to support learners when a need was identified. This support was often for personal, emotional or well-being matters. When a need for specialist support was identified, providers would often secure the support of external agencies to give learners the support they need.

The four providers had further strengthened their procedures to identify and support learners' individual needs. These providers had put a clear focus on improving the support available to learners with an additional learning need. They had raised staff awareness, made links to specialist support agencies and accessed specialist teaching and learning resources and materials. In three of the providers, they employed a specialist additional learning needs co-ordinator to help make sure that learner needs are met. In three providers, support for learners with an additional learning need had been significantly strengthened with the result that individual needs were met more quickly and effectively. Overall, across the network this strengthened awareness has resulted in an increase in the number of learners identified and supported with an additional learning need. Although the topics of radicalisation and extremism were delivered during inductions and periodically through the apprenticeship programmes, teachers, trainers and assessors did not routinely engage learners in activities to develop their understanding well enough.

All four providers had appropriate arrangements and staff training to safeguard learners. Overall, learners had an appropriate understanding of safeguarding and knew reporting procedures if a need arose. The development of learners' knowledge of radicalisation and extremism was not always undertaken thoroughly well enough. As a result, teachers, trainers and assessors did not always engage learners in activities that developed their understanding well enough.

Leadership

As well as the challenge of improving learner outcomes in health and social care and hospitality and catering, providers faced the additional challenge of a funding cut. The sector wide cut means a reduction in the number of apprentices entering employment and training.

In the four providers inspected, leaders delivered apprenticeship programmes in partnership with sub-contractors and longstanding local employers. Strategic planning carefully considered local, regional and national priorities. In each of the providers, there was regular communication between managers and staff at all levels. In the four providers, leaders shared a comprehensive range of information with their sub-contractors about the delivery of their apprenticeship contracts, for example on Welsh Government communications, learner progress and outcomes data and safeguarding.

All providers had sound arrangements in place to self-evaluate the quality of their provision, but these arrangements needed to be further sharpened in three of the four providers. In these cases, the providers' quality improvement documents often identified helpful targets for improvement in key areas but the plans were not always clear and precise enough to support monitoring or measure impact. In one provider that needed follow-up, their procedures and practices were not robust enough in clearly identifying the key strengths and areas for improvement across the provider and its sub-contractors. In this provider, improvement plans and targets were not sharp enough and lacked sufficient focus on the key areas for improvement. Self-evaluation was not always linked well enough to quality improvement processes with clear actions for improvement. Each of the four providers had beneficial professional learning activities available to staff and, in the best cases, these were shared with sub-contractors.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

Gower College Swansea

1. Improve the rates at which apprentices achieve their frameworks and ensure that all apprentices successfully complete on time
2. Review and strengthen the effectiveness of key processes and systems that underpin performance monitoring, self-evaluation and improvement planning, including how the views of learners are taken into account
3. Ensure that all learners develop their literacy and numeracy skills through their vocational context

CAVC Apprenticeships

1. Improve framework success rates and timely completion in underperforming areas, especially higher apprenticeships
2. Ensure that teachers and assessors learn from each other to improve their practice
3. Ensure that self-evaluation by middle leaders informs effective improvement across the network

ITEC Training

1. Improve the rates at which learners achieve their apprenticeships and reduce the number of late completers
2. Ensure that teaching, learning and assessment are consistently available, planned and delivered well to support individual learners' progress, including in their literacy and numeracy skills
3. Ensure that all employers meet their obligations to support the training of their apprentices
4. Ensure that effective and rigorous quality and oversight arrangements identify and address risks early and drive improvements in a timely way

ITEC Training Company

1. Improve framework success rates and timely completion rates in areas of underperformance
2. Improve the quality of short, medium and long-term target setting when planning for learners' progress towards framework completion
3. Strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning to make sure that actions are clearly identified and improvement planning targets are precise and robust to drive improvement

Case studies

Cardiff and Vale College Apprenticeships

Care, guidance and support

Cardiff and Vale College Apprenticeships support teams offer a wide range of services for learners. There are strong arrangements in place to identify learners' support needs and to monitor support appropriately in order to develop learners and support their progress. Clear processes were devised for apprentices who presented with an individual development plan, those who declared an additional learning need at the start of their programme and those who staff suspected had an ALN.

Teaching and learning experiences

Cardiff and Vale College Apprenticeships works in a region with the most diverse landscape in Wales in terms of economic prosperity and the diversity of the communities within it. The college recognises the key challenge to tackle poverty across the region and support prosperous communities. It positions its approach around strategic core themes, which include providing a responsive and impactful apprenticeship delivery, maximising opportunities for young people to engage with apprenticeships, increasing engagement beyond level 2 and a commitment to priority sector areas. In order to meet these aims, it ensured that provision was planned at a strategic level, in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders.

Gower College Swansea

Employer boards

In 2017, Gower College Swansea created a strategy to enhance collaboration with employers. To stay ahead of constantly evolving skills needs and to ensure that employer demands were understood, the college created eight employer boards resulting in the co-creation of provision.

Support for learners with an additional learning need

Gower College Swansea reviewed and improved their approach to identifying and supporting apprentices with disabilities and those presenting with additional learning needs, promoting the extensive support available to learners with disabilities, sensory impairment, additional learning needs (ALN) and work/life limiting health conditions. Many individuals have faced learning and work challenges without formal diagnosis or support until embarking on their apprenticeships.

Cambrian Training

Industry engagement and influence

Senior leaders are particularly active in the food, drink and hospitality sectors. They attend employer representative group meetings and have long-standing relationships with a wide range of employers across Wales. They work with employers and representative bodies to address current and future skills gaps and training needs. As a result, the provider develops its provision to meet these skills needs for the food, drink and hospitality sector across Wales.