
Higher Apprenticeships in work-based learning

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Introduction

This report is written in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Cabinet Secretary's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2017-2018. The report examines standards, provision and leadership and management in higher apprenticeship programmes in the work-based learning sector across Wales.

This report is intended for the Welsh Government and leaders, managers and staff of work-based learning providers. It may be of interest to the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, Careers Wales, further education colleges, universities and employers with employees participating in the higher apprenticeship programme. The report may also be of use to employers who are considering recruiting higher apprenticeship learners or upskilling existing employees.

Background

Higher level apprenticeships were introduced in 2011. The Welsh Government funds 19 work-based learning providers to deliver apprenticeship programmes across Wales. Currently, 17 of these providers deliver higher apprenticeships programmes through their own provision as well as in partnerships with consortium members and sub-contractors. Two work based learning providers do not deliver higher apprenticeship programmes.

The higher apprenticeship programme is a work-based training programme. It offers employed individuals the opportunity to gain a number of recognised qualifications and essential skills while earning a wage. Higher apprentices work towards completing a national vocational qualification framework at level 4, 5, 6 or 7. These qualifications are comparable to HNC, HND, foundation degree and honours degree respectively. The qualification is employment related with the theory knowledge at higher education level and practical competence skills assessed in the work place. It is designed to equip individuals with the higher-level skills and knowledge that meet the needs of employers and offer the opportunity to develop professionally at a managerial or supervisory level.

A higher apprenticeship programme can also accredit prior learning or existing work related skills. For example, a learner on a level 5 higher apprenticeship programme may have been managing staff for a number of years and can now have this formally recognised in their qualification.

All learners on higher apprenticeship programmes are employed in the company in which they work for at least 16 hours per week. All higher apprentices must be paid at least the national minimum wage while completing their qualification framework or the full wage or salary for the job role. A training agreement must be drawn up and agreed between the employer, apprentice and training provider setting out the details of the programme.

The time allocated to complete a higher apprenticeship qualification framework depends on the nature of the qualification, and is typically around two years. For example, the level 5 health and social care adult management qualification can take up to two years, whereas the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) level 4 framework qualification can take up to 18 months.

In work-based learning, qualification frameworks require observation and assessment in a working environment. On the higher apprenticeship programme, the design of the qualification framework requires learners to complete a competence-based qualification framework from level 4 to level 7 and relevant technical knowledge questions. Learners without the relevant proxy qualifications also have to complete the Essential Skills Wales qualifications in communication and application of number. Some frameworks may also require the learner undertake an Essential Skills Wales qualification in digital literacy.

Qualifications Wales is in the process of undertaking sector reviews of vocational qualifications. To date, they have completed reviews of health and social care (Qualifications Wales, 2016) and construction and the built environment (Qualifications Wales, 2018). This has resulted in new qualifications being developed in health and social care. Qualifications Wales are also consulting on proposals for action to address issues relating to the existing qualifications in construction and the built environment.

The white paper “Taking Wales forward” (Welsh Government, 2016) included a commitment to deliver 100,000 apprenticeships in Wales, prioritising the development of higher level skills (level 4 and above).

The recent Welsh Government’s apprenticeship policy and five-year action plan (Welsh Government, 2017) aims to address skills shortages and establish a new system for framework review and development, including degree level apprenticeship programmes. Currently, there are no degree apprenticeship programmes being delivered in Wales. Two degree frameworks, in digital/IT and engineering, have been commissioned by the Welsh Government. The digital degree apprenticeship programme is planned to start from September 2018.

The Welsh Government Apprenticeships Skills Policy Plan 2017 states that

“by 2024, it is projected that over half (51 percent) of those in employment in Wales will hold qualifications at level 4 or above. This is in contrast to around a quarter in 2004 (28 percent)”. (Welsh Government, 2017, p.5).

Historically, many apprenticeships have been delivered at levels 1, 2 and 3. In response to these challenges, the Welsh Government priorities for 2016 to 2022 are to:

- addressing acute skill shortages
- introducing an all age apprenticeship programme approach
- jobs and growth – developing higher level skills
- improving access, equality and equity of opportunity
- developing sustainable skills pathways – integrating apprenticeships into the wider educational and economic system
- establishing a new system for framework review and development

The apprenticeship levy is a UK government employment tax that came into force in April 2017. It is applied across the whole of the UK to all organisations with an annual pay bill of £3m or more. The levy aims to create demand across the public and private sectors.

Main findings

- 1 There has been an increase in the number of learners undertaking higher apprenticeship programmes in work-based learning over the last five years. Over the last four years, the rates at which learners successfully complete their higher apprenticeship qualification have improved, but they are still low in comparison to apprenticeships at lower levels. The rates at which learners successfully complete their qualification vary too much between different providers. A minority of higher apprenticeship learners take too long to complete their training programmes.
- 2 Most higher apprenticeship learners undertake programmes in health and social care and business, administration and law. There are very few learners taking higher apprenticeships in the skills priority areas of information technology and engineering.
- 3 Most higher apprenticeship learners demonstrate strong practical skills in the workplace. In many cases, they build on existing skills to develop a clear understanding and set of competences when undertaking complex tasks. Learners joining the programme with degrees or higher-level literacy skills tend to make strong progress in gaining qualifications as part of the framework. However, a minority of learners, particularly those learners moving on from level 3 frameworks, make slower progress and struggle to articulate the required theory knowledge in written assessments.
- 4 Nearly all learners and employers value the opportunity to participate in the higher apprenticeship programme. Many learners benefit from gaining new qualifications or accrediting their existing skills into formal qualifications. Around half of learners attend useful off-the-job training sessions to support their learning, for example with professional seminars, and workshops for finance and digital literacy. However, many employers do not support learners to attend these sessions.
- 5 Most employers promote the programme with their existing staff to ensure a better qualified workforce. In the best cases, employers allocate an experienced mentor to work with the learner, but, in a few cases, learners do not receive any mentoring support from their employer. Many work-based learning providers work well with a wide range of employers to promote and encourage learners to join the higher apprenticeship programme. However, a few providers do not engage with a wide enough range of employers to contribute to the higher apprenticeship programmes. In addition, a few providers do not work effectively with employers to match learners on programmes that link well to their job roles.
- 6 Most providers have improved their recruitment and initial assessment practices. All providers carry out the Wales Essential Skill Toolkit (WEST) assessment process to identify and determine learners' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs. However, learners say that this assessment process is often time consuming and training providers do not take into account learners' previous literacy and numeracy qualifications as 'proxies' for essential skills qualifications. In a few cases, this means that learners are required to complete essential skills qualifications or WEST resources unnecessarily.

- 7 Almost all providers gather information through initial assessment about the language ability and preference of learners. However, few learners take up the opportunity to complete their assessments in Welsh despite being provided with Welsh-speaking assessors and Welsh-language materials.
- 8 Nearly all providers deliver a comprehensive induction package, either with small groups of learners or in one-to-one sessions. These sessions are generally informative and cover topics such as health, safety and wellbeing, safeguarding, how assessment activities will be carried out, and the learner's responsibilities while on the training programme. In a few cases, providers do not explain clearly the time commitment and amount of work required by learners. This can lead to learners leaving the training programme early due to pressure of work or family commitments.
- 9 Nearly all assessors use a broad range of methods to assess vocational skills. They support the learners well and understand their individual needs. In a few cases, assessors do not use higher-level questioning to develop learners' skills and knowledge further. A few assessors are not qualified or experienced enough at the level required to carry out assessment activities.
- 10 Across all the work-based learning providers visited, the standard of learners' work in portfolios was appropriate to the level of qualification. However, the quality of written feedback from assessors is too variable. In the best examples, assessors give constructive feedback on how to improve, but when feedback is of poorer quality, written feedback is very limited or not provided in a timely manner.
- 11 Most assessors visit learners regularly to review their progress and keep in contact by telephone and email. Generally, assessors set appropriate targets for learners and encourage them to work independently, often using research skills to investigate and analyse the information they need for their assignments. The Welsh Government sets contractual requirements for providers to undertake learner progress reviews. These reviews are generic and do not differentiate between learners from foundation to higher apprenticeship programmes. A few assessors, who have learners in managerial positions, do not always adapt the review process to make it more appropriate for the level of the learners' qualifications and the experience these learners already have in reviewing staff performance.
- 12 Leaders and managers in the majority of work-based learning providers have not had sufficient impact in securing improvement in success rates. In these providers, quality improvement plans do not focus enough on the performance of higher apprenticeship programmes as part of their quality processes. Only a few work-based learning providers manage their higher apprenticeship programmes well and have been able to secure consistently strong outcomes.

Recommendations

Work-based learning providers should ensure that:

- R1 All learners complete their qualification framework in a timely manner to improve successful completion rates
- R2 All learners are on the correct higher apprenticeship programme to reduce the high number of early drop outs
- R3 All learners have a mentor to support them in the work place
- R4 Employers provide support for learners to attend workshops and off-the-job training sessions
- R5 They engage with and recruit new employers to participate in training programmes to reduce the over-reliance on existing employers

The Welsh Government should:

- R6 Make sure that all providers understand how learners' existing qualifications can be accredited for essential skills qualifications
- R7 Match the number of higher apprenticeships in different sector subject areas more closely to demand by employer and the economy of Wales

Outcomes for learners

Higher Apprenticeship outcomes

- 13 In 2016-2017, 11,130 learners were undertaking higher apprenticeship programmes in Wales. The number of learners has risen steadily since higher apprenticeship programmes were introduced in 2012 (see figure 1). Compared to the number of learners taking all work-based learning programmes (including work ready, traineeships, foundation apprenticeships, apprenticeships, higher apprenticeships and other work-based learning programmes), this represents a growth in the proportion of learners undertaking higher apprenticeships from 4% to 20%. Higher apprenticeships account for 24% of the total number of learners undertaking apprenticeships (foundation apprenticeships, apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships).

Figure 1: Number of distinct learners undertaking higher apprenticeship programmes 2012 to 2017, and their proportion compared to the number of learners in all work-based learning programmes

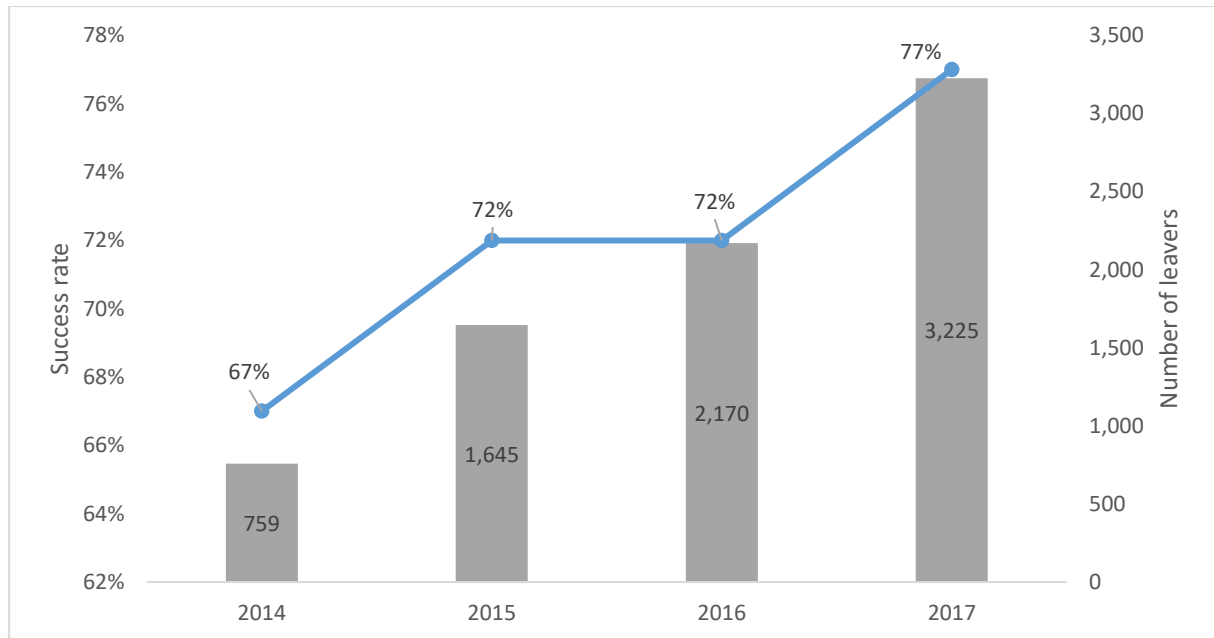
Year	Number of learners undertaking higher apprenticeships	Percentage of all work-based learning learners
2012-2013	2,470	4%
2013-2014	5,320	8%
2014-2015	7,645	13%
2015-2016	10,430	19%
2016-2017	11,130	20%

Source: Welsh Government (2013 – 2018), Table 4

- 14 Welsh Government data for the learning outcomes for higher apprenticeship learners typically shows the number of 'leavers' from a programme. A leaver may have successfully completed all the components of their qualification framework (a 'successful completion') or may have left for a variety of reasons without having achieved all the components of their framework. Since higher apprenticeship frameworks typically take up to two years to complete and learners can enrol at any time of the year, there are always fewer leavers in any one year than there are learners undertaking programmes.
- 15 Figure 2 shows the number of learners who left their programmes, and the proportion of these who left having successfully completed their higher apprenticeship qualification framework. In the first two years following the introduction of the higher apprenticeships qualifications, successful completion rates were very low, at 67%. This was partly because a minority of learners left their programmes early, without completing.
- 16 Over the last three years, the overall successful completion rate has risen to 77%. While the success rate has improved, learners leaving their programmes early

continues to be a significant concern. In comparison to the success rates of foundation apprenticeships (83%) and apprenticeships (82%), successful completion rates for higher apprenticeships are low.

Figure 2: The number of learners leaving their programmes, and the proportion who leave having successfully completed their full framework, 2013-2014 to 2016-2017



Source: Welsh Government (2015-2018)

- 17 There is considerable variation in success rates between providers. A minority of higher apprenticeship learners who successfully completed their full qualifications frameworks take notably longer than expected to complete their training programmes.
- 18 Figure 3 shows Welsh Government data for the number of learners who successfully completed full higher apprenticeship frameworks over the last four years in 10 different sector subject or learning areas. Two learning areas, Health, public services and care and Business administration and law, account for most of the learners. The number of learners who successfully complete their frameworks in Health, public services and care increased from 510 learners in 2013-2014 to 1,890 learners in 2016-2017. Successful completion rates in this learning area increased from 79% to 82%. In health and social care, most of the qualifications studied are level 5 diplomas in management, residential management and advanced practice. The second largest learning area for higher apprenticeships is Business administration and law. In this area the number of learners successfully completing their frameworks increased from 220 in 2013-2014 to 1,225 in 2016-2017, and successful completion rates increased from 48% to 71%. The main qualifications offered in this learning area are the Institute of Leadership and Management at levels 4 and 5.
- 19 In comparison to the two largest learning areas, very few learners undertake or successfully complete higher apprenticeships in the other learning areas. The regional skills partnerships identify some of these learning areas, such as IT and engineering, as high priority for the economy, but the number of learners undertaking programmes in these areas remain low.

Figure 3: Number of learners successfully completing their full higher apprenticeship framework, and success rates, by sector subject area 2014 to 2017

Sector Subject Area	2013-2014		2014-2015		2015-2016		2016-2017	
	Leavers attaining full framework	Success rate	Leavers attaining full framework	Success rate	Leavers attaining full framework	Success rate	Leavers attaining full framework	Success rate
Health, Public Services and Care	510	79%	975	75%	1,365	80%	1,890	82%
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	.	.	0	.	5	*	35	*
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	15	*	30	*	25	*	45	81%
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	.	.	0	.	10	*	20	*
Information and Communication Technology	.	.	*	*	*	*	5	*
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	.	.	*	*	15	*	5	*
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	.	.	0	.	0	.	0	.
Arts, Media and Publishing	0	*	*	*	0	.	*	*
Education and Training	.	.	0	.	0	.	0	.
Business, Administration and Law	220	48%	615	68%	750	60%	1,225	71%
All sector subject areas	750	67%	1,645	72%	2,170	72%	3,225	77%

All figures are rounded to the nearest 5 and therefore there may be apparent slight differences between the sum of the constituent rows/columns and the totals.

Source: Welsh Government (2015-2018)

Progression

- 20 Learners wanting to join higher apprenticeship programmes have access to clear progression pathways. They can progress from level 3 to level 4 and level 5 qualifications, providing their job role matches the assessment criteria in the qualification framework. Many learners take the opportunity to progress to higher apprenticeships from lower level qualifications. This supports their employability. In a very few cases, where learners are not involved in setting and monitoring their own targets, they are unsure about how much progress they are making and what they need to do to complete the qualification. This means that they do not become independent learners, which is a key requirement at this qualification level.
- 21 Almost all learners gain valuable new skills in the workplace or are able to accredit their existing skills into qualifications. Many learners stated this was beneficial and helped them with promotion opportunities in their workplace. In many cases, learners develop new skills that enable them to be more effective members of staff and a greater asset to their employers. For example, they develop skills in project management, leadership and managing change within large organisations.

Case study 1: North Wales Training – Studying a Diploma in Business and Administration level 4

A learner started on a level 2 Administration qualification while on a temporary contract with Conwy County Borough Council. Due to her commitment and enthusiasm, she was encouraged to undertake level 3 Business Administration while on a temporary contract. As a result, the learner secured full-time employment with a local third-sector organisation. The learner finished her level 3 before moving to level 4 to reflect the increased responsibility. Despite taking a year out to have her second child, she returned to her studies determined to complete her qualification.

The learner's role within her work place has changed and she is now the lead for introducing new systems, particularly IT systems, into the workplace. She also has responsibility for several staff and is considering undertaking the Diploma in Management at level 4.

- 22 Many learners are positive about their learning experience on higher apprenticeship programmes. Most learners are keen to “earn while they learn” and welcome the opportunity to be able to gain formal qualifications. In a few cases, learners do not develop effective independent learning skills and are too dependent on their assessors to support them through their training programme.

Case study 2: Cambrian Training Company – Studying a higher apprenticeship in food manufacturing excellence

Leaving school at 18 with three A levels, this learner had the chance to go to university to study psychology, but chose to earn while he learned as an apprentice butcher.

He progressed from a Foundation Apprenticeship to an apprenticeship in meat and poultry industry skills and then to a higher apprenticeship in food manufacturing excellence, winning competitions along the way, including the Young Welsh Butcher of the Year.

He returned to his former school to inspire Year 10 pupils to consider an alternative route into their future careers. He is part of a team of ‘Apprenticeship Ambassadors’ selected by the Welsh Government to promote the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship.

“I’d been working at the shop for nearly three years as an assistant before I decided to do an apprenticeship. I was the first apprentice they’d taken on and I don’t think either I or the company knew how much of a success it would be.”

The owner of the butchers where he works said: “Encouraging him to pursue an apprenticeship with us was the best thing we could have done. His hard-work ethic and the skills that he’s gained through the apprenticeship programme have helped him go on to achieve so much success, which has had a huge impact on our business.”

Wales Essential Skills Toolkit and Essential Skills qualifications

- 23 Nearly all learners undertake the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) initial assessment at the start of their training programme to diagnose their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy levels and identify any support needs. In the best examples, providers and learners stated that the use of WEST resources helped learners to develop their skills. WEST is a useful tool for assessing learners on lower level training programmes or those with literacy and numeracy skills deficits. However, learners with high-level literacy and numeracy skills, for example with degrees and good prior qualifications in English and mathematics subjects, are often required to undertake WEST resources rather than using their pre-existing skills and qualifications as proxies. In these cases, learners and providers commented that WEST is not the most appropriate tool to assess these learners' high level skills. The Welsh Government is currently reviewing the WEST Toolkit, following the Qualifications Wales report on the revised Essential Skills Qualifications in December 2017. This review of WEST is due to be completed in January 2019.
- 24 Generally, completing essential skills qualifications helps learners to upskill or update their literacy and numeracy skills. Many learners who have high-level qualifications, such as university degrees in specialist subjects, may not have undertaken a maths or English qualification for a number of years. As a result, they reported that the essential skills qualifications helped them to refresh and further develop their literacy and numeracy skills. However, a few learners reported that undertaking these qualifications was unnecessary and also felt that their existing qualifications should be used as proxies. In many cases, providers are not aware of, and do not use, proxy qualifications appropriately.
- 25 The delivery of essential skills qualifications is very challenging for most providers. Many learners face barriers undertaking a test in examination conditions, for example where learners do not have appropriate facilities in the work place to undertake the tests. The need for learners to attend 'offsite' controlled tasks or tests is not popular with learners or employers. However, in the best cases, providers work well with learners and employers to devise strategies to overcome barriers and make supportive arrangements to complete these qualifications.

Standards in sessions observed and in learners' work

- 26 Most learners demonstrate strong practical skills in the workplace. In many cases, learners build on existing skills to develop a clear understanding and set of competences when undertaking complex tasks. For example, learners develop skills in project management or update their information and communication technology across a large organisation.
- 27 As many learners have often been employed in a high-level job role for some time, their practical skills are well developed. Most higher apprenticeship learners have portfolios of work that contain extended reports, drawing appropriately on research findings and occupational theories. Learners joining the programme with degrees or higher-level literacy skills tend to make strong progress in gaining qualifications as part of the framework. However, a minority of learners, particularly those learners moving on from level 3 frameworks, make slower progress and struggle to articulate the required theory knowledge in written assessments.

- 28 Where learners use Welsh as their first language or have good Welsh language skills, very few chose to undertake formal written assessments in Welsh. These learners will often engage in verbal discussions and questioning with their assessor in Welsh. In a few cases, for example where almost all learners on a higher apprenticeship programme in health and social care are able to speak Welsh, assessors will carry out assessment activities in Welsh.

Learner engagement

- 29 Many learners have been employed in their current job role for a number of years. In a few cases, joining the higher apprenticeship programme has enabled them to accredit their existing skills and gain formal qualifications as an alternative to going to university. Most learners commented that they have strengthened a variety of skills such as:
- leadership and management
 - communication
 - research and referencing
 - self-reflection

Most learners said there were a number of benefits to participating in the higher apprenticeship programme. These included:

- earning while learning
 - increased knowledge base, learning from assessors with more expertise
 - flexible learning
 - increased job or promotion opportunities
- 30 In few cases, learners stated that the higher apprenticeship programme was too demanding and difficult to balance with work and home life. As a result, these learners often fell behind with their learning or left the training programme. In many of these cases, this was due to limited advice and guidance by the provider about the expectations and commitment required to complete the programme.

Provision

- 31 In a few cases, providers have difficulty in recruiting the high calibre assessment staff with appropriate qualifications and experience required to deliver the higher apprenticeship programme at level 4 and level 5. Providers also have difficulties in delivering a range of professional workshops and support for learners at level 4 and level 5. The Welsh Government is reviewing delivery and funding arrangements as part of the post-compulsory reform of education and training.
- 32 Currently, there are a wide range of qualification frameworks available. Many of these frameworks are out dated and do not reflect current industry practice or meet the demands of the employer. For example, there are a number of large companies (Go Compare, Centrica, Brains Breweries and the BBC) who cannot engage with the current frameworks because they do not match employees' job roles. As a consequence, they have to develop their own training frameworks in order to meet their employees' training needs. The Welsh Government is working with Qualifications Wales to review the qualifications to ensure that the higher apprenticeship qualification frameworks meet the needs of Welsh learners and Welsh employers. The Welsh Government also plans to increase the number of higher apprenticeships in science, technology, engineering and mathematics by 2019.

Recruitment and induction

- 33 Almost all providers make sure that assessors check that learners have the appropriate level of skills to match the training programme before they join. This helps to ensure that the learner can achieve the full qualification framework and identifies any skills gaps the learner may have.
- 34 Assessors and other provider staff generally provide appropriate advice and guidance about the commitment required to achieve the full qualification framework. In few cases, learners do not understand the level of commitment required. In almost all sectors, except social care, learners do not need to gain the qualification to remain employed. In a majority of cases, this leads to the learner leaving the training programme early due to the pressure of work and other commitments outside of the workplace, such as family responsibilities.
- 35 Nearly all providers deliver a comprehensive induction package, either with small groups of learners or in one-to-one sessions. These sessions are generally informative and cover topics such as health, safety and wellbeing, safeguarding, how assessment activities will be assessed, and the learner's responsibilities while on the training programme. In a few cases, providers do not explain clearly the time commitment and amount of work required by learners.
- 36 Many providers have recently placed a sharper focus on addressing these issues and fewer learners are leaving their training programme early. As a result, the high number of learners who take longer than scheduled to complete their qualification is starting to reduce.

- 37 Most providers have improved their recruitment practices to make sure that learners are recruited onto the right training programme that suits their job role. Many providers have built up productive, long-term relationships with a wide range of employers. These relationships often result in employers being proactive in recruiting learners, and in encouraging employees to join the training programme. In a few cases, it can result in learners joining higher apprenticeship programmes that may be unsuitable for them.
- 38 While recruitment directly onto higher apprenticeship programmes is suitable for some learners, there remains a need to promote and market training programmes at lower levels. Training at level 1, level 2 and level 3 provides learners with a wide range of vocational skills that enables them to gain and sustain employment. A substantial number of employers in Wales are small and medium enterprises (SME) or micro businesses that require their employees to have the skills necessary to support their businesses effectively, which may be at lower levels. SMEs and micro-businesses do not require many of their workforce to operate above level 3, as this would require working at a supervisory level and developing a wide range of experiences.
- 39 In a few cases, providers use “cold calling” to recruit new learners from existing employers. This method of recruitment is not always effective in matching the skills required for the qualification framework to those that the learner may currently have. In a number of cases, learners are not working at a high enough level within their job role. This means that they will not be in a position to collect the necessary evidence for their qualification portfolio or undertake tasks to a high enough level in their job role.
- 40 Early findings from inspection suggest that employers are using the apprenticeship levy with higher apprenticeship programmes to upskill existing staff and give them the opportunity achieve formal qualifications.

Support and reviews

- 41 Provider staff give strong support to learners in the workplace. They carry out regular visits to learners to review their progress, discuss work submitted, advise on research projects and set appropriate targets for future work. The Welsh Government sets contractual requirements for providers to undertake learner progress reviews. These reviews are generic and do not differentiate between level 1 to level 5. A few assessors, who have learners in managerial positions, do not adapt the review process to make it more appropriate for the level of the learners' qualifications and the experience these learners already have in reviewing staff performance.
- 42 In a majority of cases, employers provide helpful mentoring support for learners. For example, one employer used past achievers of the qualification framework to mentor new learners on the programme. In another workplace, the employer introduced a buddy system to enable learners to share best practice and ideas about how best to achieve their goals. However, in a few cases, learners do not receive any mentoring support from their employer. This means that they make slower progress and do not develop and apply their theory skills well enough.

- 43 Around half of learners attend beneficial off-the-job training sessions to support their learning. These sessions include professional seminars, workshops for budgeting and finance and digital literacy. However, many employers do not support learners to attend these sessions. In a few cases, these sessions are not run consistently across the higher apprenticeship programme or within work-based learning providers. For example, in one provider, workshops are only available for those learners on the higher apprenticeship in business administration, rather than for all the higher apprenticeships being delivered by the provider.

Teaching and training

- 44 In a majority of providers, teaching and training sessions are delivered well. Training staff plan learning experiences well and have clear aims and objectives to meet the needs of learners and employers. Almost all learners receive a good balance of on and off-the-job training. In the best cases, training staff challenge and stimulate learners effectively. They ensure that the pace and level of the session are appropriate to the learners. In a minority of providers, teaching and training are less effective because:
- staff do not have the appropriate experience and qualifications to deliver training sessions
 - staff are not familiar enough with the most recent theory and practice
 - sessions are often slow paced and lack effective challenge so that learners do not make the progress that they are capable of
 - staff do not build on what learners have learnt in previous sessions

Assessment

- 45 In a majority of cases, assessors plan assessments well, taking into account the progress learners are making and assessment requirements in the workplace. In a minority of cases, assessment is not planned in a timely manner to prioritise the most appropriate assessments to support learners' needs. The quality of written feedback by a majority of assessors in learners' portfolios is mostly evaluative and includes constructive comments to help the learner improve.
- 46 Nearly all assessors use a broad range of methods to assess vocational skills. This includes direct observation in the work place, completion of projects and assignments and presentations. Assessors support the learners well and understand their individual needs. However, in a few cases, assessors do not use higher-level questioning techniques to develop learners' skills and knowledge further. A few assessors are not qualified or experienced enough at the level required to carry out assessment activities. In a minority of cases, assessors do not mark learners' written work with clear feedback and, as a result, learners do not understand how to improve their work.
- 47 Most work-based learning providers have well-qualified and experienced staff. Many assessors have the appropriate level of skills, experience and qualifications to meet the demands of the higher-level framework qualifications. In a few work-based learning providers, recruitment of assessors of the right calibre and with the required level of skill is difficult. Where this is the case, a few providers have arranged a programme of training and development to address these shortages.

- 48 There are very few learners undertaking higher apprenticeship programmes who have been identified as having additional learning needs. Where needs were identified, providers are able to provide appropriate support.
- 49 Almost all providers gather information through initial assessment about the Welsh language ability and preference of learners. However, few learners take up the opportunity to complete their assessments in Welsh, despite being provided with Welsh-speaking assessors and Welsh-language materials. There is still much work to do to ensure that trainers and assessors develop naturally occurring opportunities for learners to use their Welsh language skills. For example, in a few public service organisations, learners are not encouraged to use and extend their Welsh as an employment skill.

Leadership and management

- 50 Only a few work-based learning providers manage the higher apprenticeship programmes well and have secured consistently strong outcomes. These providers manage and quality assure their higher apprenticeship provision well through their partnerships with subcontractors. In a majority of work-based learning providers, leaders and managers have not had sufficient impact in securing improvement in attainment rates, which remain around the national comparator. In a few work-based learning providers, leaders and managers lack a clear focus on developing strategies to improve outcomes for learners and quality assuring provision.
- 51 In a minority of providers, senior managers have robust strategic management procedures to review performance regularly against the targets and performance levels set out in the provider's contract. Actions for improvement are clearly defined and acted upon, often leading to improvements in outcomes for higher apprenticeship learners.
- 52 Quality improvement plans in a majority of providers do not focus enough on the performance of higher apprenticeship programmes. Often, improvement plans have generic actions and targets for apprenticeship provision as a whole rather than a clear focus on higher apprenticeships. A very few quality improvement plans lack detail and rigour in addressing significant shortcomings in higher apprenticeship attainment.
- 53 Nearly all the providers visited have effective, long-standing relationships with a wide range of international, national and local employers. Almost all employers welcome the opportunity to train or upskill their staff through the higher apprenticeship programme. They value the support offered by staff from the provider.
- 54 Many leaders and managers do not engage well enough with new employers to offer the higher apprenticeship programme. With the recent introduction of the apprenticeship levy, providers have an opportunity to engage with a wider range of employers to promote higher apprenticeships to meet their current and future training needs. Too many providers have an over-reliance on repeat business from the same pool of employers.
- 55 Only a few providers take account of the views of learners and employers participating in higher apprenticeship programmes to improve this provision as these programmes are only a small part of their overall provision. Many providers have adapted learner voice surveys to gauge the views of their learners and inform improvements more generally.
- 56 Almost all providers have a comprehensive programme of continuous professional development for their staff. In one provider, all new assessors have to complete the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) qualification at level 5 to make sure that they understand the requirements of the qualification. Training staff and assessors have the opportunity to attend workshops or gain qualifications in a variety of subjects, such as coaching and mentoring, diploma in advice and guidance,

diploma in business management and the essential skills practitioners' award. In a very few cases, assessors can return to the work place on an exchange visit or secondment for a short period of time. However, often the professional development is about generic issues, and not closely linked to shortcomings in quality assurance activities.

Case study 3: Portal Training

Portal Training has been established since 2014. They write and sell resources for schools across Wales and England to support teaching staff and middle leaders. All learners complete higher apprenticeship programmes at level 4 or level 5 in the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) qualifications. They work as a sub-contractor in partnership with ACT and Acorn Training. They have 293 learners on higher apprenticeship programmes.

Elevating Excellence sessions

These are professional development sessions for senior leaders / middle leaders and teachers. There is a schedule of workshops and seminars throughout the year, delivered by professional people such as the head of employment law at a solicitors' firm that has specific expertise in issues relating to the education sector. These sessions provide an opportunity to listen and ask an expert in the field questions about human resources that could instigate new processes within the school relating to staff management, wellbeing and communication. These sessions are well attended and valued by learners on the higher apprenticeship programme.

Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on:

- work-based learning inspections from 2015 to 2018
- lifelong learning Wales record (LLWR) data provided by the Welsh Government
- visits to work-based learning providers
- a visit to the Confederation of British Industry Wales
- interviews with learners
- interviews with employers
- interview with assessors and training staff
- scrutiny of learners' work
- scrutiny of providers documentation including self-evaluation reports and quality development plans

Inspectors visited a number of employers and interviewed learners participating in the higher apprenticeship programme during October and November 2017. Inspection evidence was gathered from employers and learners in the form of an aide memoire and questionnaire.

Work-based learning providers visited/surveyed as part of this study were:

- ACT
- B-WBL
- Cambrian Training Company
- Coleg Cambria
- Gower College Swansea
- Group Llandrillo Menai
- People Plus
- Quality Skills Alliance/Cardiff and Vale College
- Torfaen Training
- Vocational Skills Partnership
- Skills Academy Wales Neath Port Talbot – as part of the thematic focus on inspection
- Acorn Training – as part of the thematic focus on inspection
- ISA Training – as part of the thematic focus on inspection

Sub-contractor or consortium partners

- ITEC Training Solutions – sub-contractor
- LMJ Training – sub-contractor
- North Wales Training – consortium partner
- Portal Training – sub-contractor
- Rossett Training – sub-contractor
- Sirius – sub-contractor
- Talk Training – sub-contractor

Glossary

Essential Skills Qualifications	Qualifications designed to improve learners' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills
Foundation Degree	A combined academic and vocational qualification
Higher apprenticeship	A training programme offering vocational qualifications up to degree level
Level 1 to level 7	The level of qualification a person can study
National comparator	A Welsh Government measure to benchmark providers' performance against other work-based learning providers
National Vocational Qualification	A work-based qualification that recognises the skills and knowledge a person needs to do a job
Proxy qualifications	Qualifications that can be used to exempt learners from completing parts of the qualification framework
Qualification Framework	A formal system for describing qualifications
Wales Essential Skills Toolkit	A suite of tools to support essential skills qualifications, such as screeners, initial and diagnostic assessments and learning materials
Work-based learning	An educational strategy that provides learners with real life work experiences and the opportunity to gain qualifications whilst employed in the work place

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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