

Widening Access to Apprenticeships

**Supporting positive choices in
post-16 education and training**



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November 2013

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Summary

Jobs and economic growth are a priority for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Youth unemployment in the UK was allowed to rise by more than 40% during Labour's thirteen years in office which was unacceptable. Since 2010 Liberal Democrats in the Coalition Government have helped create more than a million apprenticeships and are aiming to deliver at least another 250,000 by 2015.

In Wales, the number of people on apprenticeships placements fell by more than 29% between 2006 and 2012. The Welsh Liberal Democrats believe that the Welsh Government is failing to be proactive enough in opening up access to apprenticeships. This paper proposes key ways to raise the profile of apprenticeships and to simplify the system so that more young people apply for apprenticeship places in Wales.

We are calling on the Welsh Government to widen access to apprenticeships by:

- i. Developing a school liaison programme to increase the prominence of apprenticeships in the provision of career advice to young people.
- ii. Establishing an Apprenticeship Ambassadors scheme to promote positive role models.
- iii. Improving the visibility of competitions to celebrate excellence in skills.
- iv. Trialling a UCAS-style single application process and clearing house system to improve the parity of approach between career routes.



Eluned Parrott AM as an apprentice at British Airways Maintenance Centre, Cardiff

1. Introduction

Apprenticeships provide a vital link between education and the workplace, enabling the apprentices themselves to gain skills and build a career, and delivering skilled employees to business. It is a classic win:win opportunity, and yet the system has been under significant pressure in recent years.

Between 2006/7 and 2011/12 the number of people on apprenticeship placements in Wales fell by more than 29%¹. The scale of the decline among those applying from school directly, however, has been masked since the start of the recession by a significant increase in the number of older individuals choosing to take up apprenticeships as a means to retrain in a difficult labour market. If we take that change in the demographic make-up of apprentice applicants into account, the fall in terms of the number of young people entering an apprenticeship directly from school is ~40% over the same period. As the economy continues to recover, it is reasonable to expect that fewer older individuals will want or need to use apprenticeships as a vehicle to retrain, and the decline in applications from school-leavers will lead to a fall in the number of applications to apprenticeships overall.

¹ Stats Wales: Number of work-based learning programmes by age group, gender and programme type <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learning-Network-Analysis/NumberOfWorkBasedLearningProgrammes-by-Age-Gender-Programme>

Turning this decline around will require concerted effort both by increasing the supply of places by encouraging new employers to enter the market and tackling issues of capacity, and stimulating demand for those places from talented young people.

There are supply-side issues which are, if not unique, certainly particularly relevant to Wales. These Welsh challenges include ensuring access to apprentice opportunities in rural Wales, and encouraging a higher proportion of SMEs to take on apprentices, in an economy with relatively few of the larger employers (250 employees or more) which are more likely to employ apprentices². Funding additional places is welcome, but will not be the whole solution if we hope to use apprenticeships as a means to change the character of our workforce. We need to change attitudes towards skills-based learning if we are to create the kind of highly-skilled workforce that will give Wales a competitive advantage when attracting inward investment and developing successful home-grown businesses. We need young people to be inspired by the opportunities that apprenticeships offer to them, and to make them a positive, pro-active route of choice.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to focus primarily on culture and demand issues, looking at practical ways to widen access to apprenticeships and overcome some of the psychological and practical barriers that prevent young people from pursuing this route as a pathway to a career.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eluned Parrott", with a horizontal line underneath it.

Eluned Parrott AM

Welsh Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister
for Enterprise and Business

² UKCES (2010) The National Employer Skills Survey for England 2009: Main report. Wathupon Dearne: UKCES.
<http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/evidence-report-23-nessmain-report-2009.pdf>

2. The case for change: barriers to increasing the take-up of apprenticeships in Wales

2.1 Reviewing the evidence

In 2012, the National Assembly's Enterprise and Business Committee identified a number of issues that prevented young people from seeking to or applying for an Apprenticeship programme in Wales. These findings were supported by evidence from a number of young people interviewed about their own experiences for the enquiry, in addition to evidence from Youth Cymru, the National Training Federation for Wales and some employers.

It is clear that despite attempts to modernise and reinvigorate the Apprenticeship System itself over the past decade, there is a commonly-expressed opinion that some significant challenges still remain. These include:

- a lack of visibility for Apprentice opportunities at school and at home;
- a perceived lack of value and issues of esteem;
- an applications process that is not always consistent or well understood;
- a support system that subconsciously favours university routes for high-achieving students;
- a lack of consistent support in overcoming practical barriers.

If these issues are not addressed, apprenticeships will continue to be viewed as a secondary (or even tertiary) route for young people at post-16 level, with university and entering the workplace without formal training taking precedence.

There are dangers that for the individual, the most appropriate and fulfilling route to work will not necessarily be chosen, that they become disengaged from education and training at the crucial early stages of the career development and that for that reason, they will not have the opportunity to reach their full potential economically or personally and may remain in low skilled or lower paid opportunities.

For the economy, the effects of a low-skill workforce are devastating. It stymies efforts to attract inward-investment, forcing a focus on low-paid work with low barriers to exit; in other words, the kinds of jobs that could as easily be performed in cheaper labour markets elsewhere and are therefore most vulnerable to relocation out of the Welsh economy. But it also hampers quality innovation and acts as a barrier to the creation of indigenous new businesses.



Mark Williams MP as an apprentice at Morrisons

Many of Wales' SMEs are in industries such as construction, where apprenticeships are the normal route for professional development. If the future workforce lacks high-level skills and the confidence in their professions to be able to establish their own successful businesses, Wales will become even more reliant on the public sector as a provider of employment and money spent in the private sector will increasingly move over the border to England rather than remaining in the local economy.

By contrast, there is a broad consensus that investment in training is directly linked to improved competitiveness and economic performance. For example, the International Labour Office (ILO) found that "estimates for European countries show that a 1 per cent increase in training days leads to a 3 per cent increase in productivity, and that the share of overall productivity growth attributable to training is around 16 per cent (CEDEFOP, 2007)"³, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that "a one percentage point increase in training is associated with an increase in value added per hour of about 0.6%."⁴



Kirsty Williams AM as an apprentice
at Welsh Royal Crystal

has focussed, rightly, on improving access to information about apprenticeship opportunities. Anecdotal evidence from current apprentices suggests that even those individuals who actively wanted to take up an apprenticeship had struggled to find the information they needed, with the Apprenticeship Matching Service – one of the few informational sources on apprenticeships - being difficult to use and many employers preferring their own services. Clearly, those who were less motivated to follow this route may well have simply given up. While it is early days for such a matching service, the provision of information is by its very nature still a reactive response, supporting the choices of those individuals who do know what they want and know where to ask for advice. There is still a comparative lack of proactive information provision for young people assessing their future career routes.

Recent changes to the working practices of the newly merged Careers Wales⁵ will see the focus move away from providing one-to-one advice on a routine basis. While streamlining the services provided has the potential to deliver some benefits in terms of the consistency of the service provided to users, including young people, the reduction in direct contact time could potentially exacerbate this problem.

³ International Labour Office (2010) 'A Skilled Workforce for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth: A G20 Training Strategy', Geneva.

⁴ The Impact of Training on Productivity and Wages: Evidence from British Panel Data – IFS WP05/16

⁵ Announced by Deputy Minister for Skills in April 2013 <http://wales.gov.uk/newsroom/educationandskills/2013/7317946/?lang=en>

3. Attributes of a successful system

A successful system is one that allows equality of opportunity for young people to enable them to follow the most appropriate and fulfilling pathway to employment. A system where some routes are perceived as 'more equal' than others militates against equality of opportunity because it demoralises and demotivates those individuals for whom one of the 'less equal' routes is personally preferable. For that reason, attacking issues of esteem should now be a priority.

The Welsh Government's work in this Assembly to date

3.1 Promoting apprenticeships

If we compare the promotion of university education with the promotion of apprenticeships for young people, the mis-match is clear. The promotion and provision of advice about university education available to potential students in Wales includes:

- three regional Reaching Wider partnerships supported by HEFCW;
- engagement activity by Student Finance Wales ;
- information provision by Careers Wales;
- UCAS engagement activities, including HE fairs and school talks;
- UCAS information provision via a single web-based course-finder directory and application system;
- widening Access outreach strategies embedded in every Welsh HEI as part of tuition fees negotiations with HEFCW;
- widening Access and outreach activities embedded in UK-wide monitoring mechanisms such as HESA⁶ returns;
- widening Access teams with activity in each of Wales' universities ;
- schools Liaison teams in each of Wales' universities;
- PR and Marketing teams in each of Wales' universities providing a wide range of web and print-based information;
- subject-specific activities, such as med-Wales for potential medical students and WISE Wales to encourage young women to study the sciences.

By contrast, the promotion of apprenticeships consists of:

- information provision and apprentice-matching service through Careers Wales;
- apprenticeship Week activities, supported in Wales by Careers Wales⁷;
- marketing activity in FE Colleges, a proportion of which is related to apprenticeships.

There are also sub-conscious reasons why the system favours higher education over further education or apprenticeships. Firstly, teachers are the most frequently approached source of expert advice, and while all of them will have first-hand experience of higher education, relatively few have experience of having been an apprentice or work environments outside education. They are therefore more able to talk about higher education than other routes to careers.

Secondly, in many places in Wales (though not all), schools compete with FE colleges for students at post-16 level. This could provide a disincentive for schools to pro-actively engage with local FE college. According to Careers Wales: "It would appear that some schools are reluctant to recognise apprenticeships as a realistic option for brighter pupils. The post 16 learning/training environment can be complex and competition between providers is not always helpful."⁸

⁶ Higher Education Statistics Agency. HESA collects comparative performance data on a wide range of HE-related targets, including widening access.

⁷ Activities in Wales do not appear in the UK-wide Apprenticeships.

⁸ Careers Wales' written evidence to Enterprise and Business Committee enquiry on Apprenticeships: <http://www.senedd.assemblywales.org/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Id=3281>

3.2 Changing perceptions and actions

If we are to be successful in effecting a change in both perceptions and actions, we must design a system that tackles barriers at a range of levels. The specific challenges identified in encouraging young people to actively consider apprenticeships suggest we must aim to;

- **Make it desirable**

Potential apprentices need to be able to see themselves in that role, and feel positively disposed to the idea if they are to seriously consider it as an option. This can be encouraged by providing face-to-face contact with role models as '*interpersonal relationships*' are key factors in order to inspire and motivate' a particular career or education pathway.⁹

- **Make it comprehensible**

If a system cannot be easily understood not only by potential applicants, but also by their friends, parents and other advisors, the benefits of taking part will be equally unclear. The range of different qualification levels, application processes and delivery types can introduce an element of doubt when individuals are considering their options.

- **Make it accessible**

In some parts of Wales a fundamental challenge is being able to physically access an apprenticeship placement in the local area, but the accessibility of information and advice is also important in helping young people to make positive choices. Initiatives such as shared apprenticeship schemes aimed at SMEs and improved brokerage services can be helpful in tackling regional supply issues, but while the provision of reactive information has improved, more could still be done to provide proactive support to young people to guide them through the decision-making and application process.

- **Make it supportive**

A natural part of the decision-making process for complex choices is cognitive dissonance – a sense of unease about decisions that have been made. It is important for this reason to maintain regular and reassuring communications with applicants during the application process and into the early stages of the apprenticeship itself to act against applicants dropping out unnecessarily. Completion rates are improved by close partnership between employer, apprentice, and training provider, with each being aware of their obligations.¹⁰ This is difficult to achieve in a consistent way if the application and support processes for different schemes vary significantly.

The majority of current communications about apprenticeships rely on a reactive strategy that encourages potential applicants to access a single, web-based resource. The recent redevelopment of that web resource has made accessing information easier for potential applicants, but the strategy itself has serious limitations if we seek to tackle some of issues of visibility and esteem that have been identified.

⁹ Sjaastad, Jørgen (2012), Sources of Inspiration: The role of significant persons in young people's choice of science in higher education, International Journal of Science Education, Vol. 34, No. 10, pp.1615-1636.

¹⁰ University of Warwick IER (2010) Bulletin: Maximising Apprenticeship Completion Rates, Number 96, p.3.

Reactive methods of communication can potentially provide a first and definitive source of advice and support to those individuals who actively choose to engage with it, but can do nothing for those who do not seek it out. It therefore goes without saying that reactive communications are utterly ineffectual in terms of profile-raising for a product.

Nor will a reactive strategy ever be able to overcome perceptual barriers, because those negative perceptions will, in the first place, prevent an individual from actively pursuing more balanced information. Even in a complex decision-making process such as this, it is human nature not to continue to research something if we have psychologically ruled it out.



William Powell AM as an apprentice at RWE npower renewables

It is therefore clear that, acting in support of the single streamlined source of information, a proactive strategy for changing perceptions and inspiring young people to consider apprenticeships is needed.

4. Challenging perceptions: a proactive approach

Communications strategies that are designed to change someone's behaviour attempt to move the target audience through the following stages:

Attention – Interest - Desire – Action¹¹

The current, reactive system of support for the promotion of apprenticeships falls at the first barrier because it fails to capture the attention of the target audience. The larger part of the presumed target audience, young people still in school, are extremely easy to reach as a group, though harder to engage with as individuals.

4.1 Attracting attention and interest

We need to develop an approach that not only grabs the attention of the young people who make up the larger part of the target audience, but also takes them through the decision-making process so that they can make a positive and informed choice between university, an apprenticeship, or entering the workplace.

The bulk of the presumed target market, young people still in school, is relatively easy to reach. Provided that their school is willing to pass information forward, they are a captive market, and one which is very effectively and proactively addressed by universities and agencies promoting higher education.

¹¹ The AIDA principle, attributed to E St Elmo Lewis.

However newspaper, broadcast and internet-based written communications are not considered the most effective methods of communication with this group. Face-to-face communications are used heavily by universities in particular, because they are direct, convincing and adaptable. Face-to-face schemes such as the Women in Natural Sciences (WINS) programme in America¹² or visits to physics research centres in Europe¹³ which give participants the opportunity to talk to STEM professionals influences participants' educational and career decisions¹² and increases participants' motivation to enter a scientific profession.¹³

The approach is cost-effective for a schools-based audience because the target market is to be found in one place. By contrast, outside of school this group are difficult to target on the basis of age because they do not act as a homogenous group – they don't watch the same commercial television channels or listen to the same radio stations. They are confident users of the internet and therefore use a very wide range of different browsers and websites, moving between different social media platforms frequently. They don't tend to read local newspapers or magazines that have a specific geographical spread. Traditional advertising using either new or traditional media has a very poor rate of return on investment under these circumstances.

The lack of parity of approach between promoting HE and promoting apprenticeships is a significant cause of bias in the provision of careers advice to young people.

⇒ **Action 1: Develop a Widening Access/Schools Liaison programme – to introduce the idea of apprenticeships in schools.**

What: The Welsh Government should develop a Widening Access programme to talk to young people about apprenticeships. The programme should focus on visiting schools to deliver talks/question/answer sessions and other activities to young people during their secondary school careers. It should work primarily with 11-16 year-olds (although it should market higher apprenticeships to 16-18 year-olds too), and should have the scope to engage with parents through careers/parents' evenings. It should aim to give information about what life as an apprentice might be like with the younger part of the audience, and more practical information about how to apply to older students.

Why: A programme of school visits and talks is a cost-effective way to communicate with the primary target audience, their parents and advisors. The programme would provide a counter-balance to the weight of communication young people receive about university as a potential future route into the world of work, while proactively imparting positive, accurate messages about the benefits of following a skills-based course.

By choosing an approach that is currently used by universities in their own marketing efforts to this age group, the programme would also send the subliminal message that there is comparability between the two routes, and give the impression of parity of value through parity of presentation.

¹² Fadigan, Kathleen and Hammrich, Penny (2004) A Longitudinal Study of the Educational and Career Trajectories of Female Participants of an Urban Informal Science Education Program, Journal of Research in Science Teaching, Vol. 41, No.8, pp.835-860.

¹³ Neresini, Federico et al. (2009) Exploring a Black Box: Cross-National Study of Visit Effects on Visitors to Large Physics Research Centres in Europe, Science Communication, Vol. 30, No.4, pp.506-533.

How much: Welsh Government-funded widening access initiatives such as Reaching Higher-Reaching Wider cost approximately £2 million per year.¹⁴ A similar level of investment would be anticipated. The initiative could provide for both HE and apprenticeships, demonstrating parity and continuity between the two.

4.2 Desire

The negative perceptions expressed by young people interviewed by the Enterprise and Business Committee were not borne out by the experiences of young apprentices appearing before the same committee. This suggests that a better understanding of, and greater visibility for, apprenticeships could be effective in tackling perceptual barriers.

A similar challenge has been faced by the scientific establishment in encouraging more young people to study the sciences at school and beyond. Educationalists and the scientific institutions identified that a negative perception of science was persisting with young people, who apparently believed that science subjects were either hard or boring to study. Over the past twenty years or more, a range of projects have been established to challenge those perceptions and offer young people a positive experience and view of the sciences. These include the development of hands-on Science Centres such as Techniquest, outreach activities delivered in schools, and a range of Ambassador programmes aimed at different age groups. These Ambassador programmes in particular can be extremely effective in tackling pre-conceived ideas, and have the benefit of showing young people what being a scientist is like. Being able to ‘see themselves’ in their ambassador’s footsteps is a critical step, because it demonstrates to them that this is an option that is credible for them personally.

The challenge of overcoming stigma and false preconceptions in this instance mirrors the challenge faced now in changing opinions about the value and attractiveness of taking an apprenticeship. The dramatic fall in the number of apprentices being trained in the past decade means that today, many young people will not know anyone who has been or is currently an apprentice, and that lack of personal knowledge and contact will make it harder for them to imagine themselves doing the same thing. Essentially, if they can’t relate to an individual who is an apprentice, they find it difficult to relate to the idea of being one themselves. Some young people can find it difficult to be pioneers, and providing them with role-models and pathfinders will help them move psychologically from simply being aware of apprenticeships to being able to see themselves following that path.



Jenny Willott MP as an apprentice at Panasonic Manufacturing UK

¹⁴ HEFCW (2005) Reaching Wider Initiative Progress Report, HEFCWW/05/98.

Ambassador programmes would also have a strong value in breaking down pre-conceived ideas about what an apprentice looks like, and tackling issues of stereotyping. If there is a prevailing assumption, for example, that boys go into technical apprenticeships such as plumbing or carpentry, girls may well be dissuaded from considering doing so. If those young women can be shown that there are, in fact, female plumbers, who are in many ways just like them, they will be able to see that the stereotype is a false one. The point will be demonstrated that there was no barrier for that woman to pursue the career of her choice, so there might not be one for them either. This approach was adopted in the Science Superstars programme developed by Science Made Simple, which developed a video and presentation programme featuring successful women in science and engineering careers.

⇒ **Action 2: Develop an Apprenticeship Ambassadors programme – so young people have positive role models and can see themselves in their shoes.**

What: In support of Action 1, the Welsh Government should develop an Apprenticeship Ambassadors programme, encouraging successful current and former apprentices to visit schools to talk about their own experience and answer questions from pupils. The programme will enable young people to meet apprentices and learn about their real-life experience of that route. Apprenticeships from under-represented groups (and groups that are under-represented in specific career pathways, such as women in plumbing) should be strongly encouraged to take part to help overcome the preconceptions some individuals may have about particular careers. The Ambassadors programme should be managed by the same organisation that runs the Widening Access programme to ensure that the programmes are effectively co-ordinated and in order to be as administratively efficient as possible.

Why: The Ambassadors Programme is important in taking young people from being interested in apprenticeships to being able to see themselves as one, a significant psychological barrier. This form of near-peer communication is particularly effective in that it is seen as independent, relevant and credible. It is also particularly effective in tackling gender and other stereotypes because it demonstrates that the stereotype can be overcome and has been. Additionally, the programme would have benefits for the apprentices taking part, helping them to feel a sense of pride in their role and allowing them to develop their communication skills. Participation could potentially be part of an apprenticeship course.

How much: STEMNET Science Ambassadors are volunteers¹⁵, and an Apprenticeship Ambassador would be as well. DBS checks are free for eligible volunteers. £100 would cover ambassador's training etcetera, and £30 would provide reasonable expenses such as travel and food. Comparable programmes such as the STEMNET Science Ambassadors programme are relatively low-cost because while they cover initial costs such as a DBS (formerly CRB) check and a day of training for participants, they do not cover travel expenses. This would not be appropriate for apprentices who are often less financially independent than those taking part in such schemes.

Once an apprentice is certified as an ambassador, the cost for the first visit would be £130, but would drop to £30 thereafter for subsequent visits. There are 216 secondary schools in Wales¹⁶ and even assuming a new apprentice for each visit, costs would be around £28,000. Administration costs could be achieved within the £2 million identified in Action 1.

¹⁵ Schools STEM Advisory Network Programme: <http://www.see-science.co.uk/stemnet.html>

¹⁶ Statistics for Wales (2013) School Census Results 2013.

In support of the Apprenticeship Ambassadors programme, we need as a society as a whole to celebrate excellence in skills in the way we celebrate excellence in other ways. Competitions are an enjoyable and challenging part of being an apprentice, but while these skills competitions can attract large audiences in other parts of the world, in the UK they remain an undersold opportunity.

In Wales we have a culture that supports the idea of competitions as large public spectacles, through our history of Eisteddfodau. In the long term, we could build on that experience to develop new celebrations of skills-based learning. There may also be scope to investigate partnerships with Wales' Eisteddfodau in terms of finding new platforms for skills competitions, but in the shorter term, there could be an even greater focus on promoting these events all year round, and not just during Apprenticeship Week.

⇒ **Action 3: Improve visibility of competitions and encourage school groups to attend – so that the value of skills-based learning is recognised and celebrated.**

What: Develop a programme of school visit opportunities and promotional activity around existing apprentice competitions. For the longer term, investigate the potential for developing partnerships with organisations such as the Eisteddfodau to bring existing activities to new audiences, and developing a large-scale Welsh Skills competition to act as a regular national showcase for skills-based learning.

Why: Skills competitions are an exciting and enjoyable part of the experience of being an apprentice. They show young people that we recognise and celebrate the achievements of those following a skills-based path, and emphasise that the skills developed are valued and rewarded.

Increasing the visibility of those competitions and encouraging more young people to attend will raise the desirability of apprenticeships among the target audience whilst also improving the experience of current apprentices by showing that their communities value and respect their work.

How much: Nil additional cost for the short-term option. The cost of developing a new Welsh Skills competition will depend on the scale of the event and the ability to attract sponsorship in support of it.



Aled Roberts AM as an apprentice at a housing development in Hightown, Wrexham - organised by CITB-ConstructionSkills, the Sector Skills Council and Industry Training Board for Construction, in partnership with Anwyl Construction and Wales and West Housing

4.3 Enabling action

While the Careers Wales website has been streamlined and improved in the past year, more could still be done to streamline the process by which potential apprentices apply for places. There is also the opportunity to continue the process of improvement of the Careers Wales apprenticeships website.

- ⇒ **Action 4: Trial a UCAS-style single application process and clearing house system – so that there is parity of approach between different career-progression routes .**

What: Trial a Wales-wide single information, application and clearing-house system so that all of the action points for potential applicants, from information seeking to confirming places, are found in one place. The system should provide a clear application timetable with fixed deadlines to enable schools and colleges to assist students in managing their application effectively and to provide a consistent approach for each student. It should also act as a confirmation service once any awaited exam results are gathered, and provide a post-confirmation matching service to quickly match unplaced applicants with suitable vacancies.



Roger Williams MP as an apprentice at Springdew packaging company

browsing opportunities to applying, all on one integrated platform, reduces the amount of information-searching individuals have to perform in order to progress from attention to action. This is of particular benefit to those applicants who are no longer in formal education and therefore do not have the same level of access to support. A clearing house operation after all applicants have received exam results would match appropriately qualified applicants with suitable vacant opportunities. This would cut down on the number of vacancies that remain unfilled at the end of the application cycle, maximising the number of places that are filled and offering an additional application window to potential apprentices.

Why: Providing a single resource for information, application and confirmation of places helps students to manage the process of applying to an apprenticeship much more effectively and builds on the consolidation of the Careers Wales apprenticeship website already undertaken. It will help to ensure that the application process, by being consistent, will be better understood by applicants, parents and advisors. There is also a subconscious benefit inherent in creating a parity of approach between the application processes for university and for a skills-based pathway, in that it adds an enhanced appearance of equality.

Allowing applicants to ‘click-through’ from

Creating a single application system, by providing a single and authoritative source of applicant data, also provides the opportunity for the Apprenticeship Widening Access programme to communicate with all applicants throughout the process to offer them reassurance and advice, and for the applicants themselves to track the progress of the applications they have made.

While the introduction of a single application system would have a range of benefits for applicants, it is also true that the data collected could be helpful in allowing the Welsh Government to collect data that will help it assess and address a number of supply-side issues. For example, the streamlining of processes could be used to facilitate a more effective and systematic partnership approach with employers, which would be particularly helpful if we seek to offer an improved and more targeted system of support to SMEs offering apprenticeship places for the first time.

This has a particular relevance in Wales where SMEs count for a larger proportion of employment opportunities than the UK as a whole. It could allow the Welsh Government to identify places where the drop-out rate is higher than the average, and target additional support to those at risk of disengagement. Crucially, by using a single data resource effectively, it could also allow the Welsh Government to identify the onward destinations of apprentices systematically, and to identify those areas where training and development opportunities are not well mapped onto the needs of the local labour market.

How much: The cost, per multiple application, for applying to university via UCAS is £23 per student. This fee is supplemented by other forms of financial support. If we assume an administrative cost (aside from the additional support activities outlined below) of £30 per applicant, and around 40,000 applications per year, the cost would be approximately £1.2 million. This could be offset by cost savings from replacing the existing application systems and further potential savings in combining the promotional activity currently undertaken by Careers Wales with the new information-application-confirmation system.

4.4 Supporting the process to prevent disengagement

As previously stated, another significant issue in terms of preventing young people from disengaging from career pathways is tackling cognitive dissonance, which leads individuals to ‘second guess’ decisions recently made. At this point, people need reassurance that their decision is logically sound and will make them happy.



Peter Black AM at a local charity shop in Swansea

One of the reasons why, during the long UCAS application process, applicants to university are encouraged to attend open days is to help them feel confident and secure in their choices and allow them to build a sense of contact and belonging. The regular drip-feed of communication is very effective in helping them to discuss any practical issues that may be causing concern and tackle any sense of unease by providing the encouragement they need.

Additionally, waiting for information on applications already submitted is a very stressful situation for people, and providing regular status updates to applicants can help build a more positive experience for applicants.

⇒ **Action 5: Develop an applicant support system to tackle disengagement and improve the service level for applicants.**

What: A programme of post-application communications should be developed, including practical updates on the progress of applications, and information about how the next stage in the process is going to work. Opportunities to attend open days at the FE colleges and employers of their choice should also be offered. The communications should be co-ordinated centrally and targeted to specific points in the application cycle so that messages are received regularly throughout.

Why: To reduce stress to applicants by providing them with up-to-date information on their own applications. To improve the applicant's experience of the application process, and help guide them through any actions they need to take. Most importantly, to tackle disengagement by making applicants feel a sense of belonging and pride before they have even started their apprenticeship. Improved guidance and support systems would have a positive impact on recruiting young people into the right area of learning, helping to reduce drop-out rates later.¹⁷

How much: Can be achieved at relatively low cost, as it would be developed around what is already existing. A cost of around £250,000 would be probable to account for co-ordination, production and distribution of information.



Baroness Jenny Randerson as an apprentice with British Gas

¹⁷ Ofsted (2010) "Twelve Outstanding Providers of Work-Based Learning," Manchester: Ofsted <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/twelve-outstanding-providers-of-workbased-Learning>

5. Conclusions

Young people leaving school at either 16 or 18 need to be offered a range of positive choices for their future equally and without value judgement; further study, apprenticeship or entering the workplace.¹⁸ However, there needs to be a parity of approach and a parity of emphasis in terms of the ways in which the different routes to the career of their choice are discussed in schools if we can hope to achieve a parity of esteem between the pathways available.

For too long studying as an apprentice has been seen as a Cinderella option for young people; less visible, and seen to be less valued than other routes to rewarding careers. It is now time to celebrate the opportunity that skills-based learning gives not only to the individual but also to our society as a whole.

Changing the character of our workforce in Wales has the potential to transform our economic opportunities as a location for inward investment, a place to grow and expand a business or indeed a place to start a new enterprise.

There remain real issues in terms of stimulating the supply of places for apprentices on an equal basis across the different regions of Wales, and differences in the opportunities available to rural students as opposed to their urban counterparts. However by tackling misconceptions at an early stage – at school – we can not only encourage young people to engage with apprenticeships as the exciting opportunity that they really are, but begin to change the minds of our wider society as well.

¹⁸ However for those individuals entering the workplace as a preferred option, encouragement should be given to developing a personal development plan to map out the future training they will need in order to build a successful career in their chosen field.

