

Enterprise and Business Committee
APP22

Inquiry into Apprenticeships

Evidence from Diverse Cymru



Response to the National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Business Committee Inquiry into Apprenticeships in Wales

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Background

Diverse Cymru is an innovative new organisation in the Welsh Third Sector, created in recognition of the realities faced by people experiencing inequality in Wales.

Diverse Cymru promotes equality for all. We believe that we can work together to challenge discrimination in all its forms and create an equitable future for the people of Wales.

Diverse Cymru aims to make a real difference to people's lives through delivering services that reduce inequality and increase independence; supporting people to speak for themselves and to connect with decision makers; creating opportunities for

participation and development; raising awareness of equality issues; and inspiring people to take action against inequality.

Our current services include direct payments, self directed and independent living support, befriending and advocacy. We produce information resources, run a service user involvement project and co-ordinate volunteer placements. We facilitate forums and groups that work on various issues, from improving disability access to equality impact assessments. We provide consultancy services and deliver a range of training courses on equality related topics.

We would be delighted to assist with the development of specific work programmes, and with engaging service users in future. We are happy for our response to this inquiry to be published.

Equality issues regarding apprenticeships

We feel that apprenticeships have the potential to make a significant contribution to closing the employment gap for protected characteristic (equality) groups in Wales.

There is a substantial body of evidence indicating that throughout Wales, as in the remainder of the UK, employment rates are significantly lower for disabled people and some BME groups. Even within these groups there are differences regarding employment rates with people with mental health issues in particular finding it nearly impossible to find and keep full employment.

There are also issues regarding the aspirations of these groups, with prejudice, discrimination and media portrayals of both disabled and BME people contributing to feelings both from individuals and from professionals who support them, including teachers, lecturers, social workers and careers advisors, that they simply cannot enter particular careers or succeed. This is often regardless of the abilities of the individual and is based on assumptions, rather than assessing barriers for the individual and how these could be addressed.

Additionally barriers to employment in particular sectors exist due to gender segregation and assumptions that particular careers are or are not appropriate for men or women. These interact with sexual orientation exclusion, such as the assumption that male nurses must be gay.

We believe that apprenticeships could be a route into employment for individuals from protected characteristic groups who have experienced poverty of aspiration, opportunity, skills or a lack of support at the point of leaving school. In such cases proactive inclusion and promotion of opportunities to protected characteristic groups could provide opportunities to enter a chosen career, where an individual lacks the skills, GCSEs or other qualifications required due to the aforementioned barriers.

However as the system currently stands many employers lack the awareness and knowledge required to design apprenticeships that are inclusive of equality considerations. **We therefore recommend that employers providing apprenticeship schemes should be provided with tailored equality training on involving, recruiting, employing, retaining and supporting each protected characteristic group individually.**

We also feel that the apprenticeship wage, being £1.08 lower than the minimum wage for 16-17 year olds and £2.38 lower than the minimum wage for 18-20 year olds, is a disincentive not only for young people to undertake and complete apprenticeships, but also devalues this avenue into employment. Society as a whole perceives the value of any particular career or profession based largely on earnings. Therefore paying apprentices such a low rate while training reinforces the societal perception that individuals on apprenticeships are performing low value roles and have entered apprenticeships as they lack the skills, education or aspirations to enter employment or further or higher education. **We recommend that both the apprenticeship wage rate and public awareness campaigns regarding the purpose, value and training components of apprenticeships be actively and seriously considered.**

Additionally we are concerned that under the current apprenticeship framework there are examples we are aware of where apprentices have not undertaken work related to the profession they are training to enter. One example of this is a case where an individual undertaking an apprenticeship trimmed grass for an entire 12 week period and was not allowed to undertake any further tasks. Additionally in order to address inequality of employment opportunities for protected characteristic groups, as mentioned above, it is essential that all apprenticeships identify and address any lack of general, life, or transferable skills within the training side of the apprenticeship. This should not only include basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, but independent living skills; financial management; report writing; employability skills; communication; IT and other skills gaps. **We recommend that a robust procedure for ensuring that all apprenticeships provide practical employment opportunities directly related to the field of employment and training intended. We further recommend that all apprenticeships should include a general and transferable skills analysis and training and/or support to address skills gaps,** in order to support people from protected characteristic groups into employment through the apprenticeship route.