



A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales

May 2024

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Executive summary

The junior apprenticeship programme refers to a range of vocationally-focused full-time learning programmes based in further education (FE) colleges for Year 10 and Year 11 pupils, funded by schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government. During September to November 2023, inspectors visited all five colleges offering junior apprenticeship programmes. We held meetings with college leaders and staff, representatives from the learners' schools and local authorities, as well as holding focus group workshops with current Year 10 and 11 junior apprenticeship learners and former participants in the programme at these colleges. We visited junior apprenticeship lessons and facilities used by these learners.

Working in close collaboration with schools and local authorities, these colleges have developed a range of effective programmes that operate under junior apprenticeship guidelines established by the Welsh Government to allow participating Year 10 and 11 learners to attend college on a full-time basis. These arrangements are now well established in five of the twelve colleges in Wales following an initial roll out of the programme in 2017. The programme currently involves approximately 150 learners across the five colleges. However, learners in many areas of Wales do not have similar opportunities because there are no collaborative local arrangements in place within their areas to support the delivery of junior apprenticeship programmes.

We have identified a number of key factors that underpin the establishment of effective junior apprenticeship programmes. These include:

- close collaboration along with open and effective communications between colleges, schools and local authorities
- a range of alternative vocational pathways for learners
- flexibility to accommodate local contexts
- appropriate resourcing of the programmes using a combination of funds accessed through local authority, school and further education funding mechanisms

Schools and local authorities usually work closely with colleges to target available junior apprenticeship places mainly at Year 10 and 11 learners who are struggling to engage with a traditional mainstream curriculum and are particularly interested in work-related vocational options. Junior apprenticeship programmes at colleges with the largest number of junior apprentices are consistently oversubscribed. This reflects systematic and robust recruitment and selection methods in these areas as well as the preferences of those learners who prefer more practical and vocationally focused approaches to learning. The availability of information within schools about junior apprenticeship opportunities is not consistent enough with a few learners and parents/carers only becoming aware of the programme via friends or family rather than directly from their schools.

Although we found overall transition arrangements to be effective and particularly important in helping learners adjust to a new learning environment and different style

of learning, in a few cases a lack of timely information-sharing and communication hindered continuity of support arrangements for individual learners.

Delivery and timetable arrangements differed between colleges and for different vocational pathways. Although guidelines state that programmes should be similar to full-time school teaching hours, in practice a minority of programmes and learners were timetabled for fewer hours than in school. Individual pastoral support plans that may allow this were not always reviewed effectively enough to support a return to full-time education and attendance. Travel-related considerations were also identified as being particularly important to timetable planning and often contributed to attendance and punctuality concerns.

Most learners we observed were taught in dedicated junior apprenticeship classes in the colleges' vocational facilities such as workshops or salons, where classes for older learners also take place. In the very few cases where learners take part in post-16 programmes, we found that arrangements for individual safeguarding risk assessments were not always clear or robust enough.

Most learners enjoyed the strong focus on vocational subjects and practical activities. Their improved engagement in learning was reflected in very high success rates for vocational qualifications. However, most learners still struggled to achieve GCSE English, mathematics or numeracy at grade D or above. This was compounded by poor attendance for those GCSE classes still being delivered in school as part of some junior apprenticeship programmes. Learners were more positive about these GCSEs where teachers used vocational contexts to highlight useful applications of subject content.

We identified a range of positive impacts of the junior apprenticeship programme including:

- improved levels of engagement and attendance
- very high success rates in vocational qualifications offered
- strong positive learner feedback
- strong progression rates into further education and training

The transformation in many learners' attitudes to learning from relative disengagement to making enthusiastic and ambitious choices to commit and continue to post-compulsory learning was the most striking overall impact of the junior apprenticeship programme.

We identified eight recommendations in total, intended to support the work of the Welsh Government, further education colleges, schools and local authorities involved in the delivery of learning programmes to 14-to16-year-olds across Wales.

Introduction

This report reviews the delivery of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales. The junior apprenticeship programme refers to a range of vocationally-focused full-time learning programmes based in further education colleges for Year 10 and Year 11 pupils, funded by schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government. These programmes operated under a range of different names although all were primarily focused on providing extended vocational learning opportunities alongside statutory elements of the curriculum. The report aims to highlight good practice and identify barriers to the effective delivery of the programme by further education colleges. The report also considers the impact of the junior apprenticeship programme on learner outcomes.

The report has been written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in [Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024](#) as updated in October 2023. The report is of relevance to further education colleges, schools, local authorities, learners and parents, as well as to the Welsh Government and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research.

The report draws on visits to all five further education colleges currently delivering junior apprenticeship programmes and evidence from recent inspections and engagement visits to further education colleges over the past two years. The visits to the five current providers (Bridgend College, Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Sir Gar, Gower College Swansea and NPTC Group) took place between September and November 2023.

The report is structured into four separate sections.

In section 1, we identify how junior apprenticeships have evolved since the initial roll out across Wales in 2017. We explain how programmes are funded, where learners are registered and how many colleges offer the programme, identifying reasons why others may not currently participate in the programme.

In section 2, we discuss how learners are recruited and selected for junior apprenticeship programmes, identify reasons for the uneven distribution of this provision across Wales and explain targeted approaches to initial identification of learners most suited to the programme. We share what many learners told us about their feelings before joining the programme and how learners were supported in adjusting to their new learning environment and a different approach to learning.

Section 3 details how junior apprenticeship programmes are delivered, the role of Welsh Government funding, learner attendance requirements, the curriculum focus of junior apprenticeship programmes, logistical arrangements such as travel to college, requirements for GCSE English and maths qualifications and different approaches to tutorial and enrichment activities. We then discuss the significance of class sizes, role of learning coaches, teaching staffing arrangements, learning facilities, safeguarding responsibilities and the use of pastoral support plans for learners.

In section 4, the report concludes by evaluating the impact of junior apprenticeship programmes, including contributions to local work to reduce the number of young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training), learner attendance rates, feedback from learners, English, mathematics and numeracy skills, progression destinations and potential wider personal, social and economic benefits.

We thank all the learners and staff from further education colleges and schools, and representatives from local authorities, who took part in our visits and meetings for their contribution to this report.

Background

What is a junior apprenticeship programme?

Junior apprenticeships are seen as being very different to school link programmes. School link programmes tend to provide much smaller elements of vocationally focused- learning activities and qualifications alongside a mostly school based- curriculum. In contrast, learners on junior apprenticeships tend to study wholly, or mostly, within a further education college.

Although termed as junior apprenticeships, these programmes are not based around any specified apprenticeship frameworks or detailed specified standards. Individual colleges use a variety of locally agreed titles or brands when referring to programmes that are supported by junior apprenticeship funding.

What is the purpose of junior apprenticeship programmes and who are they intended for?

The funding was made available to help local authorities, schools and colleges to work together to provide alternative education provision for Year 10 and 11 pupils, delivered within FE colleges.

The programmes directory 2023/24 published by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2023a) provides post-16 providers with a list of learning programmes that are eligible for funding and the requirements of learners. It states that:

Junior Apprenticeships offer Year 10 and 11 pupils the opportunity to study full-time for a future career in a college setting from the age of 14. The programme offers a two-year programme of work-related education with work experience built in, alongside a Level 2 course that is equivalent to four or five GCSEs, in a range of different vocational pathways. Each apprentice also studies GCSEs in mathematics and English alongside their chosen area. There are a number of programme codes in the directory to reflect different Junior Apprenticeship pathways.

Each Junior Apprentice should have access to support with teaching and learning, help with behaviour management, and a designated Welfare Officer to support day to day issues and provide pastoral care. The aim of the Junior Apprenticeship is to make the learner employable or ready to progress onto a higher level vocational course or apprenticeship at the age of 16. The Junior Apprenticeship Programme is primarily funded by the Local Authority and therefore it is essential that agreement is reached between the LA and the College before this provision is agreed. (Welsh Government, 2023, p.9)

The same guidance shown above is also included in the documents Guidance for Schools on Apprenticeships in Wales (Welsh Government, 2018a, p.16-17) and Guide for Local Authorities on Apprenticeships in Wales (Welsh Government, 2018b, p.15-16).

What junior apprenticeship programmes are available and what are the overall delivery requirements for these?

A total of eight junior apprenticeship programme titles are listed in the directory (Welsh Government, 2023a, p.31) as:

1. Public services
2. Landscaping
3. Fabrication and Welding
4. Automotive Engineering
5. Construction
6. Hair and Beauty
7. Hospitality and Catering
8. Media

Supporting information contained within the list states that learners on these programmes are required to follow a full-time curriculum in line with a school day.

Further Welsh Government guidance (Welsh Government, 2018c) sets out details relating to setting term dates and setting sessions. This states that:

Sessions must allow sufficient lesson time to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that includes the national curriculum and religious education. Schools are free to decide the length of each lesson but current recommendations per week are as follows:

Age	Suggested minimum weekly lesson time (hours)
5-7	21.0
8-11	23.5
12-16	25.0

The suggested minimum weekly lesson times relate to the hours during which pupils are being taught.

What are the funding arrangements for junior apprenticeship programmes?

Specific project funding for junior apprenticeships was introduced in 2016 and rolled out across Wales in 2017. This funding was made available to provide a contribution towards the overall costs of providing junior apprenticeship programmes.

Where are junior apprenticeship programmes available?

Eight of the twelve FE colleges in Wales have accessed junior apprenticeship funding at some stage since this funding became available. Of these colleges, at the time of writing five were accessing junior apprenticeship funding. We visited all of these five providers in autumn 2023 as part of this review.

What do we already know about junior apprenticeship programmes?

The development and roll out of junior apprenticeship programmes across Wales has led to a variety of key stakeholders publishing documents and policies designed to highlight key issues and shape future provision, local and national policies.

The development of a policy on junior apprenticeships in Wales by one of the trade unions representing staff in the post-16 sector (University and College Union, 2019) highlighted staff concerns in relation to student behaviour on junior apprenticeship programmes and a lack of appropriate continuous professional development for staff on how to deal with student behaviour issues.

A publication by CollegesWales (2021) expressed the view that, although provision is already in place to provide some 14 to 16-year-olds with vocational learning, including junior apprenticeships, this was not securely or adequately resourced. It welcomed the pledge of an additional £800,000 Welsh Government funding into developing junior apprenticeship programmes from 2017 (Welsh Government, 2017) but urged the Welsh Government to provide a secure legal basis for learners aged 14-16 to progress onto vocational and technical pathways provided by further education institutions (FEI), where this is the most appropriate option for learners. It also urged government to introduce legislation to recognise that legal responsibility in terms of safeguarding a child whose normalised setting for learning is in an FEI should sit with the college principal.

Following the [Estyn inspection of further education provision at Bridgend College](#) in March 2022 (Estyn, 2022a) the college was invited to prepare an effective practice case study on its work in relation to junior apprenticeship programmes. The resulting [case study](#), published in November 2022 (Estyn, 2022b), provides useful context and background to the junior apprenticeship programme, which is provided by the college in partnership with the local authority and local schools. The programme originated as part of a Welsh Government post-16 Creative Solutions initiative designed to support innovation in further education.

Cameo

The Bridgend College case study on junior apprenticeships (Estyn, 2022b) emphasised the value and importance of rigorous transition processes for those Year 10 and Year 11 school pupils who leave their school environment to join the junior apprenticeship programme at the college. Junior apprentices were described as young people who are struggling to remain in the school environment but demonstrate a flair for vocational learning. These learners attended college full-time for five days per week and studied a curriculum made up of core GCSEs and a vocational qualification in either construction, hair and beauty, or sport and public services. The college had space for a maximum of 90 learners on this programme.

Other key features of the programme highlighted in the case study were individualised wrap-around support for learners including the use of specialist learning coaches, provision of work-related experience and the variety of enrichment activities. The positive impact of the programme was highlighted through high success rates on vocational qualifications and destination data that confirmed that many learners progressed onto post-16 qualifications at the college, further study, apprenticeships or employment.

What do we know from other research and similar programmes elsewhere that might inform our approaches to junior apprenticeships?

Although there are a few similarities with programmes that operate in England allowing full-time enrolment of 14 to 16-year-olds in FE and sixth form colleges, there are also essential key differences. In particular, colleges in England must satisfy very specific requirements in terms of delivery arrangements and facilities as set out in UK government guidance on full-time enrolment of 14 to 16-year-olds in further education and sixth form colleges (Department for Education, 2023).

Several publications discuss the development of junior apprenticeships in Wales within the wider context of developing vocational provision opportunities for school age pupils, particularly those in Years 10 and 11.

In its report identifying new opportunities for policy learning in FE and skills across the four countries of the UK, Edge Foundation (2018) reference the junior apprenticeship programme at Cardiff and Vale College as an example of interesting practice. It emphasises several key features including:

- the innovative nature of the programme
- the focus on early identification of young people most at risk of becoming NEET
- full-time study at the college under the guidance of industry qualified specialists, in vocational facilities and real work environments
- joint funding of junior apprenticeships by Cardiff City Council, Cardiff and Vale College and Cardiff schools
- A range of six vocational pathways (Automotive, Construction, Digital Media, Hair & Beauty, Hospitality & Catering, and Public Services)
- the guarantee of either an apprenticeship or full-time course at the college to all learners successfully completing the junior apprenticeship programme

Factors regarded as contributing to the success of the programme included the clear pathways to a well remunerated job, enthusiasm amongst staff, a high quality learning environment and a strong emphasis on success.

Research undertaken for the Department for Education in England explored the evidence for effective strategies that support young people in alternative provision to increase attainment at key stage 4 and to make a successful transition to post-16 provision (Department for Education, 2017).

Findings of this research identified:

- that relatively few alternative provision programmes are rigorously evaluated by schools and providers
- the need for comprehensive assessment of a pupil's needs and aspirations, including input from pupils and parents or carers, to ensure that provision is a good match
- teachers need to adapt programmes and tasks to individual needs and learning styles of pupils
- the value of involving parents and carers in a positive way in order to provide better support to their son or daughter and achieve positive outcomes
- the importance of effective partnerships between key stakeholders, including schools, colleges and employers
- that positive relationships with staff and mastering the development of respectful adult relationships are essential for successful progression into further education or employment
- the potential benefits of therapeutic interventions alongside behaviourist techniques (which emphasise positive reinforcement and the use of sanctions) in supporting successful transition into work or further education
- the lack of consensus about the constituent parts of an appropriate alternative curriculum, although most literature supports a curriculum that encompasses core skills, including mathematics and English, alongside a vocational offer incorporating work placements
- the value and importance of small group instruction and individual attention, tailoring sessions to individual needs and a facilitative and supporting teaching style
- the need for a wide range of specialist staff who are well trained, caring and knowledgeable

How do junior apprenticeship programmes relate to the wider context of 14-16 developments within the Curriculum for Wales framework guidance for schools?

The [Curriculum for Wales Framework](#) (Welsh Government, updated 2024) was first published in January 2020 for schools and settings to use when developing their own curriculum. At the time of publication, the Welsh Government was undertaking an open consultation on draft statutory guidance on 14-16 learning under the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024c).

The draft guidance:

- sets out the legal requirements for a school's curriculum for 14 to 16-year-old learners under the Curriculum for Wales
- is designed to support schools in designing a curriculum which meets those requirements
- identifies the Welsh Government's priorities for learning and teaching in Year 10 and Year 11

The guidance sets out the key components of 14 to 16 learning under Curriculum for Wales. As part of the 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement, the guidance states that schools should look to offer a broad and balanced menu of choices that reflect the needs of their learners, which should include both general, vocational and skills-based qualifications at all qualification levels (WG, 2024c. p.7 section 4.2.8). The guidance also encourages schools to explore opportunities for partnership working – with other schools and colleges – where this will allow the school to broaden the curriculum offer available to their learners and where this is in the best interests of those learners.

Although not specifically mentioned in the guidance existing junior apprenticeship programmes are aimed at 14 to 16-year-old learners and are already designed to include general, vocational and skills-based qualifications. They have also been developed through partnership working between schools, colleges and local authorities to broaden the curriculum offer and meet the needs and best interests of learners currently struggling to engage in learning.

How will junior apprenticeships be affected by qualification reform work in Wales applicable to learners aged 14 to 16?

During the period of this thematic review and after a period of public consultation, Qualifications Wales published details of [the full 14-16 qualifications offer](#). The new National 14-16 Qualifications will be in place by September 2027. They will include qualifications from entry level to level 2 across a range of subjects. The types of qualifications include:

- Made-for-Wales GCSEs
- VCSEs (Vocational Certificate of Secondary Education)
- Foundation qualifications
- A Skills Suite – with Skills for Work, Skills for Life and Personal Project qualifications

Colleges and schools offering junior apprenticeship programmes will need to review the existing mix of qualifications used within junior apprenticeship programmes to reflect these developments ahead of full implementation in 2027.

Recommendations

Schools should:

- R1 Provide comprehensive and timely impartial advice and guidance to all pupils and their parents or carers about all 14-16 curriculum options, including junior apprenticeships where these are available
- R2 Work collaboratively with colleges and local authorities to evaluate opportunities for developing or extending junior apprenticeship programmes in order to broaden their curriculum offer in the best interests of learners

Further education colleges should:

- R3 Work closely with schools to make sure that responsibilities for safeguarding arrangements are clear and that individual risk assessments are undertaken for all junior apprenticeship learners
- R4 Share and agree timetable arrangements with partner schools and local authorities for all junior apprenticeship learners and keep them updated of any changes affecting individual learners, such as pastoral plan arrangements

Local authorities should:

- R5 Clarify and communicate future funding arrangements for junior apprenticeships with schools and colleges
- R6 Work collaboratively with all their local schools and colleges to evaluate the potential for introducing or extending junior apprenticeship provision to enhance suitable learning opportunities for Year 10 and 11 pupils struggling to engage with existing mainstream provision in schools

The Welsh Government should:

- R7 In light of the establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), clarify and publish details of ongoing responsibility and continuing arrangements for junior apprenticeships and their funding
- R8 Review specific curriculum requirements for junior apprenticeship programmes as set out in the Welsh Government programmes directory, particularly in relation to English, mathematics and numeracy qualifications to ensure qualification aims match needs and abilities of individual learners and reflect the new national 14-16 qualifications in place from September 2027

(1) Setting up and sustaining junior apprenticeship programmes

How are junior apprenticeship programmes agreed, established and sustained?

Junior apprenticeship programmes have evolved from previous programmes funded via 14-19 local area networks and Welsh Government project funds. Junior apprenticeship programmes involve collaborative working between FE colleges, local authorities and schools. Our discussions with these stakeholders found that strong communication channels are essential to both establishing and sustaining junior apprenticeship programmes. For example, regular reporting arrangements and ongoing contact with partner schools were viewed as critical to the success of these programmes.

Programmes were delivered either wholly or predominantly within FE colleges and funded through a mix of funding from schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government. Local funding arrangements and associated levels of funding differed substantially between local authorities. Where a college provided programmes linked to more than one local authority these differences also meant overall funding received per learner varied according to which authority area had responsibility for the learner. These disparities affect both the availability of junior apprenticeships and the nature of them across different local authorities. In the best cases, learners were able to choose from a range of junior apprenticeship pathways, while in other areas of Wales no such opportunities were available. These concerns are also reflected in the CollegesWales report (2021), which raised concerns about the adequacy and lack of certainty about funding for vocational provision including junior apprenticeships for 14 to 16 year-old-learners.

Most learners were dual registered, i.e. on both school and college rolls, for either the whole or most of the duration of their junior apprenticeship programme. In the few cases where learners were removed from their school roll, responsibility for these learners is transferred over into education other than at school (EOTAS) provision organised by the local authority.

Colleges receive the majority of their funding for junior apprenticeship programmes through payments agreed with local authorities and schools, usually on a per learner basis. These funds are derived from mainstream school and local authority budgets, including pupil development grants. This amount of funding varies depending on local arrangements. Colleges also receive a fixed amount per eligible learner from the Welsh Government.

Although much of the discussions around establishing and sustaining junior apprenticeship programmes has focused on funding related issues, providers also cited the need to consider their wider civic mission when making decisions about such provision. It was clear that stakeholders recognised and were influenced or motivated by these wider considerations as key drivers for running junior apprenticeship programmes.

Junior apprenticeship programmes were delivered in specific vocational pathways blended with key elements of the statutory curriculum for key stage 4 pupils. Employers were involved directly in a few examples of junior apprenticeship programmes, through the integration of work placement activities into delivery models. For example, learners on the junior apprenticeship media pathway delivered by Cardiff and Vale College attended regular weekly sessions at the Wales Millennium Centre to explore the way theatre works and to develop the technical skills required to work in this industry. However, we found that overall opportunities for junior apprenticeship learners to undertake external work experience placements are limited.

Since the roll out of junior apprenticeship funding across Wales since 2017, eight of the twelve FE colleges in Wales have run junior apprenticeship programmes. At the time of writing, junior apprenticeship provision was available in five of these colleges. Three colleges have withdrawn from running junior apprenticeship programmes. Discussions with college leaders identified a range of factors that act as potential barriers to setting up, sustaining or extending junior apprenticeship provision. These include funding-related issues, a perceived insufficient buy in from some schools and/or local authorities, concerns over learners' behaviour and resourcing issues and constraints such as staffing or facilities considerations. The remaining four FE colleges have yet to run any junior apprenticeship provision. A summary of the total number of recorded learners on junior apprenticeship programmes in each of the years 2017 to 2022 along with a breakdown by programme and provider is shown below.

Table 1: Number of recorded learners on junior apprenticeship programmes 2017 to 2022, overall

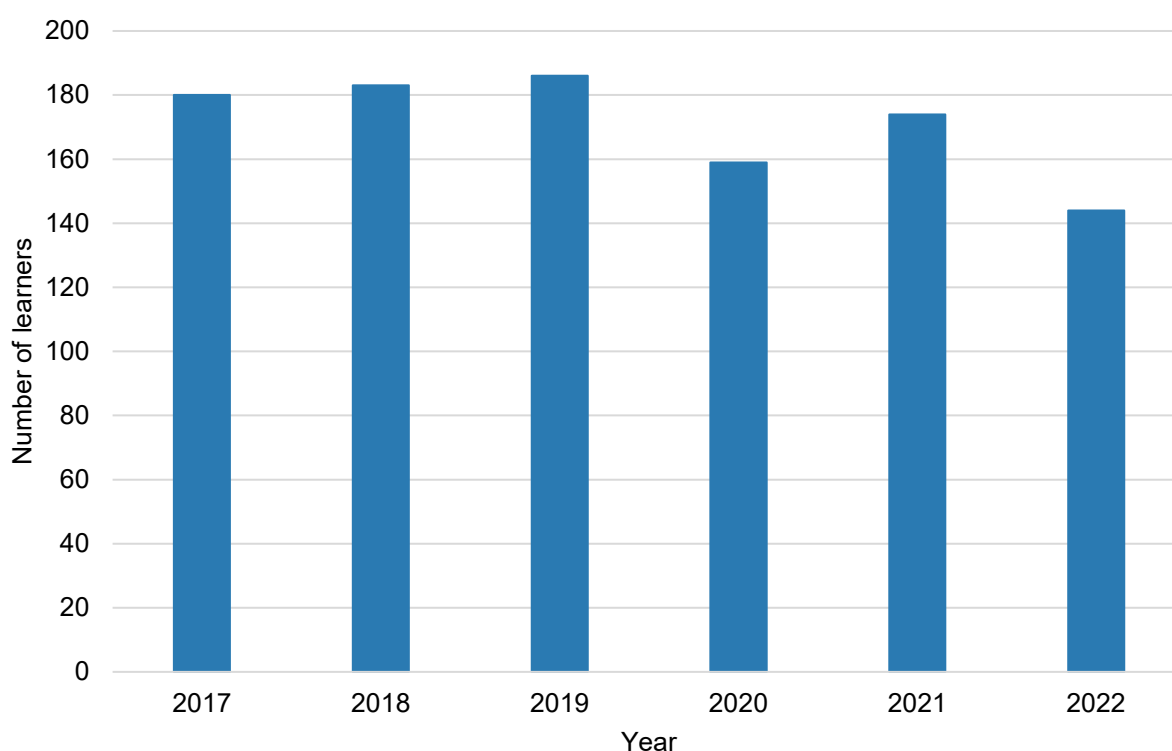


Table 2: Number of recorded learners on junior apprenticeship programmes 2017 to 2022, by programme pathway

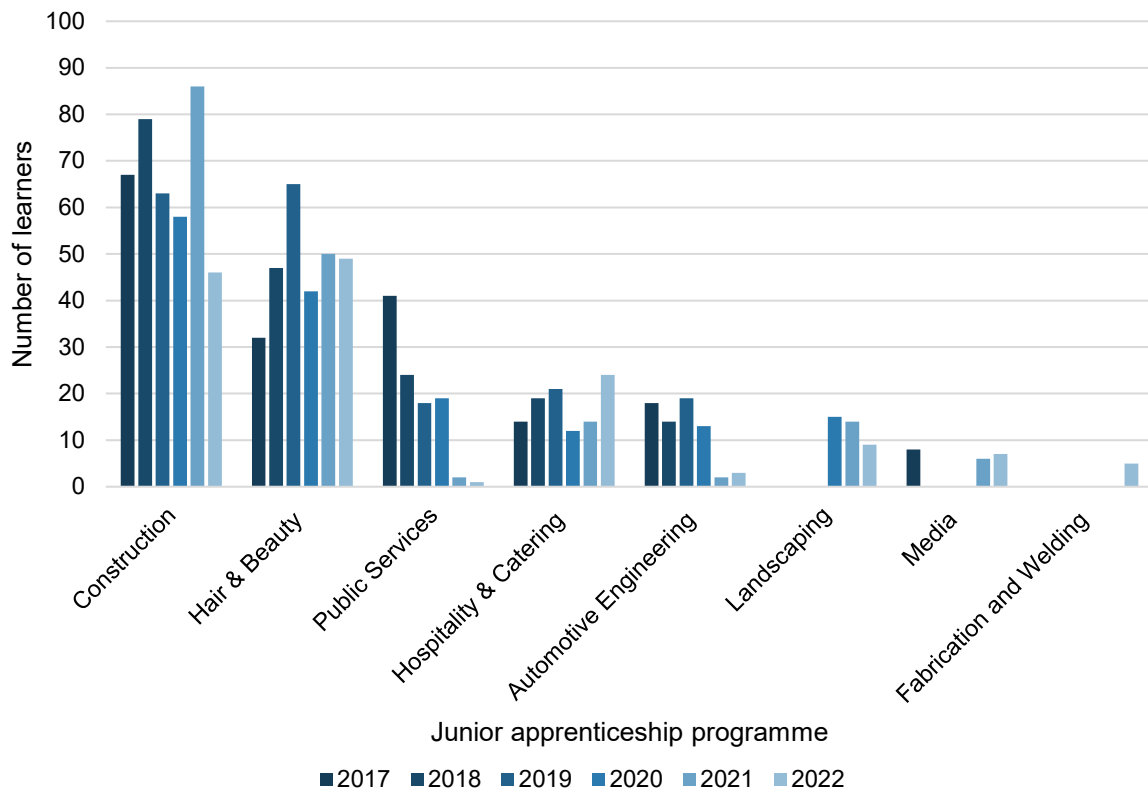
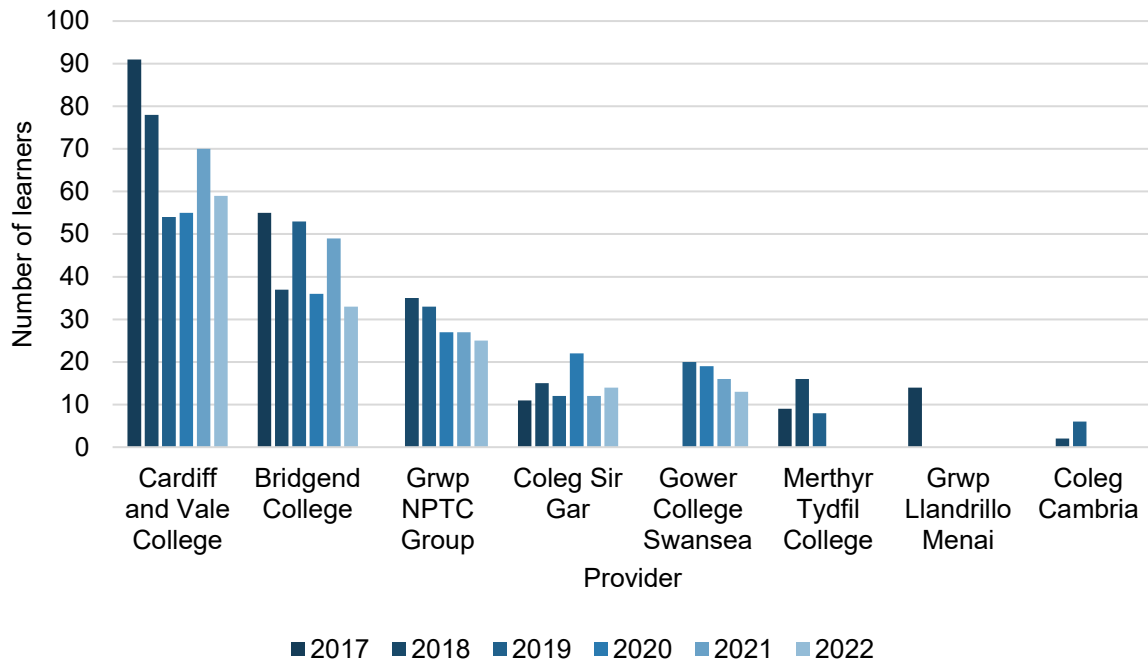


Table 3: Number of recorded learners on junior apprenticeship programmes 2017 to 2022, by college provider



Tables 1-3: Source – data provided by the Welsh Government

In colleges where junior apprenticeship programmes were active and well established, a few pathways have not always been sustained. For example, since 2021-2022 none of the colleges has offered a dedicated junior apprenticeship pathway in public services and cited insufficient demand as the main reason for ceasing this provision.

At the time of our visits to junior apprenticeship providers, stakeholders were uncertain and particularly concerned about future funding arrangements in relation to junior apprenticeships. These concerns were primarily related to the potential impact of the creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research in Wales (CTER), the new arm's length strategic authority responsible for funding and overseeing post-16 education and research from August 2024. Responsibility for funding pre-16 activity will remain with the Welsh Government after the establishment of CTER. As at April 2024, the mechanism for additional publicly funded support for junior apprenticeships was still to be confirmed.

The Qualification for the Future reform work being carried out by Qualifications Wales in shaping new National 14-16 Qualifications in Wales will also affect qualifications delivered as part of junior apprenticeship programmes. Colleges and schools will need to revisit the detailed composition of programmes of these programmes once full details of the new qualifications are confirmed.

(2) Recruiting and selecting school pupils for junior apprenticeships

How are junior apprenticeship learners recruited and selected?

Overall, our discussion with college providers indicated that, even where schools and local authorities are supporting junior apprenticeship provision, in many local authority areas and/or for many vocational pathways it was often difficult to recruit a critical mass of learners to the programme. This is particularly the case in the more sparsely populated college catchment areas. As a result, the availability of junior apprenticeship opportunities is spread very unevenly across Wales. For example, at the time of writing, there were no junior apprenticeship programme pathways available across the majority of local authority areas, including the whole of north Wales. Similarly, there were very few examples of Welsh-speaking learners accessing junior apprenticeship provision across all areas.

Where active junior apprenticeship pathways were available, access to junior apprenticeship programmes within colleges was mostly targeted to specific pupils or groups of pupils rather than these programmes being available on an open access basis to all Year 10 and 11 pupils. A variety of referral and selection methods were used by colleges, schools and local authorities in local areas offering junior apprenticeship programmes in order to identify potential learners and allocate available places. Targeted approaches tend to prioritise those who were struggling to engage with mainstream school provision and were particularly at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). The option of a junior apprenticeship programme, where these are available, is often considered as an alternative option to other education otherwise than at school (EOTAS) options including pupil referral units (PRUs).

The larger junior apprenticeship college providers tended to receive substantially more applications each year than they could accommodate. Recruitment and selection methods were particularly systematic and robust where such programmes were oversubscribed. The most robust processes involved provision of extensive information on applicants and formal panel decision making and approval methods.

The lack of open access availability to the junior apprenticeship programme for Year 10 and 11 pupils was reflected in inconsistencies in initial information, advice and guidance. Overall, information, advice and guidance on junior apprenticeships did not consistently give learners and parents or carers the information they needed about junior apprenticeship opportunities and as a result they sometimes relied too much on informal contacts or personal networks rather than benefiting from more systematic and open approaches to providing this information. A few learners or their parents/carers become aware of junior apprenticeships through word of mouth rather than from their school, local authority or college. For example, a few current junior apprenticeship learners told us that they found out about this provision either through their friends or their parents or carers finding out via their friendship groups or because they had relatives that work at a school or college offering the programme.

Many learners told us that, prior to joining the junior apprenticeship programme, they were extremely unhappy at school for a range of reasons. Reasons cited by learners included their experiences of frequently being in trouble at school, being frequently absent from school, experiencing friendship or bullying issues, feeling trapped within school, disliking the school curriculum and lessons, and big class sizes resulting in a lack of support. Nearly all learners said that they felt much happier and enjoyed their learning experiences more since joining the junior apprenticeship programme. Specific examples of learner feedback are contained within section 4 of this report where the impact of junior apprenticeships is discussed.

Transition arrangements were particularly important and beneficial to ensuring an appropriate match between applicants and the nature of the programme. Where these work well, there is close contact, open information sharing and regular dialogue between school and college staff leading up to learners commencing the junior apprenticeship programme and throughout the initial stages of the programme.

Participation in the junior apprenticeship programme based wholly or primarily in a further education college involved considerable change for learners and parents, both in terms of travelling to the college and the nature of the learning programme itself. For example, the time and distances involved to get to the college where the programme is delivered were often considerably greater than that required to travel to their local school. Learners must also be able to adapt to college life including interaction with a much wider age range of learners in and around the wider learning environment, or becoming more independent in making their way to and from college where this requires use of public transport.

These factors are important considerations for all parties involved in discussions and decision-making about individual learners' potential participation in a junior apprenticeship programme. In particular, this highlights the importance of identifying those learners who are most likely to have, or be able to develop, the necessary resilience and commitment to engage, sustain and benefit from such provision.

Although many learners who chose to join the junior apprenticeship programme were happy with their choice and able to sustain their participation, a few learners struggled to cope with the logistical demands and the commitment required. College, school and local authority representatives recognised that the logistics of attending college full-time and the nature of the programmes do not always suit everyone and that having their parent school act as a safety net was particularly important.

In the most effective cases, providers reassured learners and parents or carers that the move from school to college was not intended as a 'one-way street' and that a place at school would still be available should this be needed. In the few cases where learners did return to their school after embarking on a junior apprenticeship programme, college providers usually tried to backfill any vacant places that become available where it was feasible to do so.

In all colleges, recruitment onto individual vocational pathways within the junior apprenticeship programme strongly reflected traditional gender imbalances within specific occupational sectors and in full apprenticeship programmes. For example, very few or no males were recruited onto care or hair and beauty pathways across all

the colleges. By contrast, very few or no females were recruited onto construction and engineering pathways across the same colleges. Although colleges recognised the starkness of these disparities, too little progress is being made in challenging or addressing these as part of the initial identification and selection processes.

Cameo – challenging traditional gender stereotypes within specific vocational areas

In Bridgend College, a few groups of junior apprenticeship learners, including those on hairdressing and beauty and engineering and construction pathways, took part in vocational swap or taster days of other vocational routes as part of an initiative to highlight and address equality and diversity issues.

Although this did not rectify initial and ongoing gender imbalances during their junior apprenticeship programme the activity did encourage existing learners to consider non-traditional vocational routes as well as direct progression opportunities within their existing vocational pathways. As a result, a very few learners opted to submit applications for and progress into different vocational areas on completion of their existing programme rather than simply continue along their existing vocational route.

All providers recognised the importance of providing any additional support that was needed by individual learners. Many providers made sure that individual support needs were discussed and addressed as part of the referral and selection processes. However, individual development plans were not always shared or transferred across from school to the college and as a result this hindered or prevented continuity of support for the individual needs of the learners involved.

(3) The delivery of junior apprenticeship programmes

How are junior apprenticeship programmes delivered?

Across the five further education colleges running programmes at the time of our visits that are funded partly through junior apprenticeship programme funding from the Welsh Government, provision operated under a variety of names or brands, which vary from college to college. This included programmes referred to, or branded, as junior apprenticeships, junior academies or youth access provision. Some of the differences in the names used locally to describe these programmes reflected local choices or historical factors.

Welsh Government funding for junior apprenticeship programme learners is available to all colleges at a fixed amount per learner and is intended as a part contribution to the overall costs of the programme. It is expected that the bulk of the costs of delivering the programme would be met by the learners' local authorities and/or schools. Arrangements for funding transport and free school meals are agreed within local funding arrangements.

Colleges saw the specific junior apprenticeship programme funding from the Welsh Government as making an important contribution to the additional costs incurred in providing extended vocational options, which were often inherently more expensive to deliver than the subjects that form the mainstream school curriculum. Without such additional funding support college leaders expressed the concern that the junior apprenticeship programme would be otherwise unsustainable for schools and local authorities to support.

The structure and content of these programmes varied substantially between providers. Many required full-time attendance at college while a minority were based around shared delivery and attendance, with learners attending school for a minority of the programme such as for GCSEs in English and mathematics whilst also attending the college for other aspects of the programme including vocational classes.

The variety of delivery models that have evolved were shaped by the local context, reflecting issues such as funding constraints, physical and staffing availability and capacity as well as travel to study distances and times. This flexibility in approach was particularly valued by local colleges, schools and local authorities in allowing delivery partners to shape and agree provision that reflects and accommodates local circumstances, opportunities and constraints rather than having to follow a rigid predetermined funding and delivery model.

Arrangements for transport to and from college also varied between providers. In some areas learners travelled by dedicated school or college transport while in other areas learners made their way to and from college via public transport. Where public transport was being used, learners were provided with travel passes to allow them to travel free of charge. As with overall delivery models, the choice of transport methods was shaped by local context, availability and constraints. In other areas transport

times, availability and/or costs also acted as key potential barriers to establishing junior apprenticeship provision within specific localities.

Junior apprenticeship programmes currently being delivered were a mix of two year (Y10/11) and one year (Y11) programmes. At least half of the timetabled sessions that made up the overall programmes tend to be linked to specific vocational qualifications. Learners were particularly positive about the practical hands-on delivery style adopted in these aspects of their programmes. Most programmes include work related experience; this is usually within realistic work environments such as salons or practical workshops within the college. In a few cases, learners undertake off-site work experience placements. The work-related element is also enhanced through visits from external speakers including employers. The strong focus on practical learning activities specifically linked to vocational occupational areas is an important aspect of the provision and pedagogy that makes junior apprenticeship programmes successful for this age group and cohort of learners. In particular, the strong link to work and employment helps provide an authentic context for learning and helps engage and sustain learners' interests.

This extended vocational focus that forms the majority of the study time included in junior apprenticeship programmes clearly differentiates these programmes from more limited and shorter vocational learning opportunities that are available as subject options within the local mainstream school curriculum, including school link vocational subject options sometimes delivered in school or college for a few hours per week. The importance of this differentiation was reflected in direct feedback from many learners and staff during our visits when identifying this as one of the key reasons why junior apprenticeship programmes often succeeded in better engaging learners who had become disaffected by mainstream options.

GCSEs in English, mathematics and numeracy are also included in each overall programme and pathway. Learner feedback on the GCSE elements of the programme was mixed and markedly less positive than the views expressed on vocationally specific sessions. Overall, learner feedback on GCSEs tended to be most positive when lessons were delivered by staff employed specifically to teach on junior apprenticeship programmes.

Cameo – engaging reluctant learners in mathematics and numeracy sessions

In Cardiff and Vale College, learners spoke particularly highly of mathematics and numeracy sessions where the specialist tutor explained clearly which aspects of the course were likely to be particularly valuable in different aspects of their lives. For example, sessions highlighting those skills most needed in their chosen vocational route and other skills that are likely to be most useful within their everyday family and general working lives. The tutor was also open with learners about which other aspects they need to cover mainly or solely in order to maximise the chance of achieving the highest possible grade they are capable of even though they are unlikely to use these aspects of the subject much or at all in their future lives.

Providers also adopted a variety of different approaches to the provision of tutorial and enrichment activities, including arrangements in relation to statutory aspects of provision such as religion, values and ethics (RVE) and relationships and sexuality education (RSE). These included either regular dedicated group and individual timetabled tutorial sessions or other approaches which use themed days or sessions to cover key topics. Overall, staff and learners reported that the content and relevance of sessions was the most important factor in determining the effectiveness of these aspects of the programme rather than any inherent superiority of any particular delivery model.

Class sizes were generally much smaller in college-based junior apprenticeship sessions than learners previously experienced at school. In our discussions with learners, they were consistently positive about this difference and most place considerable value on the greater availability and responsiveness of staff. This enhanced ability to engage, support and monitor individual learner progress was undoubtedly one of the key factors contributing to the overall effectiveness of junior apprenticeship programmes in meeting the needs of learners who often struggled to engage and sustain interest in learning activities.

Learners, teaching staff and other key stakeholders, including parents and carers, valued the positive impact of dedicated learning coaches who support learners in each junior apprenticeship group. For example, learning coaches played a key role in helping maintain effective communications between all stakeholders and providing personal and teaching support for learners.

In our discussions with college leaders, staff, school and local authority representatives, staff who were recruited and selected specifically to work on junior apprenticeship programmes were often cited as a critical success factor, especially among larger providers where the volume of learners was large enough to sustain these roles. A few college leaders were also particularly positive about staff who were recruited from backgrounds where they were used to support young people at risk of disengaging with education, such as those staff with a background in youth work.

College leaders and staff also highlighted the benefit and impact of bespoke professional learning activities undertaken within their colleges for teaching and support staff involved in the delivery of junior apprenticeship programmes. For example, activities designed to help staff manage challenging behaviour of learners were identified as being particularly useful.

Overall, many learners on junior apprenticeship programmes perceived and welcomed the approach of colleges as being less formal than school. For example, learners told us they much preferred the absence of school uniform and the lack of bells at the end of each lesson, being allowed more freedom and that staff were often seen as being understanding, friendly and supportive.

Arrangements for the delivery of junior apprenticeship classes in terms of classrooms and facilities varied between and within colleges. In a minority of cases, dedicated areas within a college campus have been established for junior apprenticeship

learners, including social spaces for junior apprenticeship learners to use during their break and lunch times.

In the majority of colleges, delivery of junior apprenticeship programmes took place in mixed or integrated facilities alongside other learners. This was especially the case in terms of practical sessions linked to vocational qualifications, such as construction and hairdressing. Where dedicated facilities have been created, staff commented that this was beneficial for managing learners' behaviour and in having useable and easily accessible break out rooms for use with one-to-one or small group discussions and support sessions.

A few learners undertook their vocational learning and associated qualifications through joining mainstream post-16 further education programmes alongside older learners. Where this was the case, responsibility and arrangements for individual risk assessments were not always clear and individual risk assessments were in a very few cases either not in place or not robust enough.

Overall, across junior apprenticeship programmes there was a strong focus on learner well-being and support, including safeguarding. Most teachers, learning coaches and learner support teams generally worked well together to provide bespoke support to individual learners who often faced multiple challenges in their everyday lives. In the best cases, schools were kept fully informed on their learners' progress and any difficulties they were experiencing. However, in a few cases, gaps in information caused by lack of shared learning and support plans or lack of regular effective communication between staff across and within schools and colleges hindered the progress of individual learners and acted as a barrier to the overall effectiveness of the programme.

Guidance in the Programmes Directory 2023/24 (Welsh Government, 2023, p.31) states that learners are expected to follow a full-time curriculum in line with a school day. To fully meet suggested minimum weekly lesson time for school pupils aged 12-16 this would require 25 hours per week. In practice, timetable arrangements varied substantially between colleges. In a minority of cases, college timetables mirrored school arrangements with learners scheduled to attend classes for five full days per week in line with suggested requirements. However, for the majority of programmes, colleges timetabled learners for fewer hours per week than is the norm at school.

A minority of learners attended for fewer hours than overall timetable requirements as part of a specific individual pastoral support plan (PSP). These were interventions designed to support children and young people who were not fully meeting programme requirements and, as a result, may be at risk of permanent exclusion. Welsh Government guidance (Welsh Government, 2023b) states that PSPs should be time limited and regularly reviewed at least every six weeks; the majority of learners on PSPs remained on reduced hours' requirements for longer periods than this. Frequently, staff or learners were not aware of the intended date for a learner's planned return to full-time attendance.

Where the standard weekly scheduled teaching hours for all learners were below Welsh Government guidelines, colleges reported logistical challenges in terms of

travel to study times and distances as the main reason for this divergence, with many learners having considerable journeys to the college campus where they were based.

Arrangements for the ongoing quality assurance of junior apprenticeship programmes and key monitoring and evaluation vary between local areas. Colleges review the programme as part of their self-evaluation and improvement planning process. Where the local authority has a major role in funding junior apprenticeship provision and selecting learners for participation in the programme they also tend to have a substantial involvement in monitoring and evaluation activities. For example, officers may prepare monitoring reports, which are considered as part of wider scrutiny arrangements within the local authority. Where schools have the major involvement in funding the programme and selecting learners to participate in the programme, they are also involved in ongoing monitoring and evaluation as part of overall quality assurance arrangements. Overall, detailed co-ordinated quality assurance arrangements are underdeveloped.

(4) The impact of junior apprenticeships

What is the impact of junior apprenticeship programmes?

Junior apprenticeship programmes have been effective in extending pre-16 vocational opportunities to learners struggling to engage with the mainstream school curriculum and who prefer more practical and vocationally focused approaches to learning. However, at the time of our visits, junior apprenticeship programmes were only being delivered in five of the twenty-two local authorities throughout Wales. This has limited the overall impact of the programme and resulted in inequity in learning opportunities between regions and local areas within Wales. Where junior apprenticeship programmes were available, they made an important contribution to helping support young people who may be at risk of being NEET (not in education, employment or training) and combatting disengagement with learning.

Attendance rates of many learners participating in junior apprenticeship programmes were substantially higher than their previous attendance rates at school. Despite these frequent improvements, college leaders and staff often still identified attendance and punctuality as areas for improvement. Leaders and teachers reported that a 'COVID hangover' impact on attendance and punctuality still persists long beyond the period where restrictions were in place. One area of particular concern in relation to junior apprenticeship programmes delivered across both college and school sites was those learners who either chose not to attend the school-based elements of their learning programmes or attended them only occasionally.

A few learners leave the junior apprenticeship early. We found that this may be because the learner and parent decided that the programme is not suitable or as a result of attendance or disciplinary issues. Where learners leave the programme early, the college works with school and local authority to agree arrangements for the learner to return to school or transfer into alternative education otherwise than a school (EOTAS) arrangements such as a pupil referral unit.

Learners' feedback on their junior apprenticeship programme experience was exceptionally positive. Overall, in our focus group discussions with learners and during learning walks most gave the strongest positive feedback in relation to the hands-on practical elements of their junior apprenticeship programmes. Many learners frequently also mentioned the overall positive impact their participation in junior apprenticeships had on their mental health and well-being. The few parents we met during our college visits also somewhat reinforced this positive feedback by commenting on improvements in their child's general mood and engagement levels at home.

During our visits to colleges, we heard many examples of their learning experiences and the positive impacts that participation in junior apprenticeship programmes were having on learners' lives directly from the learners themselves. Some examples of learners' feedback and suggestions are shown below.

Learners who had recently successfully completed their programmes:

I experienced better student support, less pointless lessons, a better environment, formed better friendships with people in my class and got good support from my learning coach.

The JA programme really helped me achieve excellence. The college saw you as an individual and there was a lot of extra help where that may have been needed. Also in exam season they would offer one-to-one revision to help you achieve your main objective.

I became a much better person because of the JAs. If it wasn't for the JA programme I would have no education. I owe everything to them.

Year 11 junior apprenticeship learners:

At school they wouldn't give any support for sensitive issues, school environment was toxic, no reasoning or thought behind detentions, school could feel very forced and gave me a bad mentality.

The best things included the support given when talking to staff and practical work fits much better for me than traditional subjects.

Maths and English is so much easier in college than in school because I get so much more help and support and there's a smaller group so everyone can be heard.

Our tutors are much more supportive than what it was like in school. College improved my attendance a lot, our tutors treat us like adults based on our maturity which I find helps a lot.

The JA programme gives us a head start in our future and it helps me know more about what I want to do in the future. You can go to any teacher and they're always there to support you.

It's a little class compared to school and it's better, and there's no uniform! JA's a family.

It's a completely different environment, surrounded by new people and amazing opportunities, great to have another opportunity for education, it was the best decision I made.

College is different to school because there's less people in my class and no one judges me for who I am which helps with my social anxiety a lot. Hair and beauty is creative and I am a creative person.

Contributions from Year 10 junior apprenticeship learners included:

Junior apprenticeship is helping me a lot – from staff members to well-being. Any problems I have I can talk to staff who help me with problems in college to

personal problems. I never got on with my teachers at school which was affecting my education.

Smaller classes than school, teachers treat us with respect, the hair and beauty classes, making friends with people that like what I like.

The college is fun, I really love the course and we all like bricklaying a lot.

I'm learning a lot more than in school, enjoying college gives me something to wake up to and enjoy.

I think the college is very suitable for kids like me who can't cope in normal schools. It is a very good opportunity to get a good job when we grow up.

I enjoy doing bricklaying and carpentry. I do it to get a good job. It's nice to meet new people and I enjoy exploring the campus at break. College is good way to teach kids who are not suitable for school.

It's a more hands on way of learning and it will help me get a good job which is a very good opportunity for me as I didn't work well in school.

Suggestions for improvements frequently related to providing information to potential learners:

Inform or tell more people about Year 10 and 11 junior apprenticeship programmes.

Advertising junior apprenticeship opportunities at Year 7 or 8..

Hold open days for Year 9s and hold post-16 taster days for current junior apprentices to help with progression choices

Local attainment data provided by colleges indicated that nearly all learners who completed junior apprenticeship programmes achieved their main vocational qualifications. These qualifications were usually substantial in nature and represent significant achievements for the learners, especially in light of their starting points before joining the junior apprenticeship programmes.

Although many learners made considerable progress in developing their English, mathematics and numeracy skills, overall attainment of high grade GCSEs (grade C or above where applicable) remained a major challenge for this cohort of learners despite most learners sitting these examinations and achieving graded outcomes.

Learner destination data also provided by colleges indicated that many learners progressed directly onto mainstream post-16 FE programmes on completion of their junior apprenticeship programme. This is a considerable achievement and reflects a major impact of participation in these programmes and a marked change in these learners' attitudes to and perceptions of learning: from a position of major disengagement from learning to making a positive and active choice to participate in post-compulsory learning. A few other junior apprenticeship learners progressed onto Jobs Growth Wales Plus or full apprenticeship programmes.

Methods and evidence base

The findings of this report are based on:

- In-person visits by His Majesty's Inspectors to all five further education colleges delivering junior apprenticeship programmes at the time of writing
- Information from recent inspections and link inspector visits over the past two years to further education colleges delivering junior apprenticeship programmes
- Information received from the Welsh Government detailing learner numbers and associated per-learner funding allocated directly to each further education college delivering junior apprenticeship programmes since 2017

Visits to further education colleges

Visits took place between September and November 2023. They were based at each of the five further education colleges delivering junior apprenticeship programmes in 2023-2024. The five colleges we visited were Bridgend College, Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Sir Gar, Gower College Swansea and NPTC Group. Each of the visits included representatives from the college, schools and local authorities.

Visits involved the following activities:

- Meetings with senior leaders of the college
- Meetings with local authority and school leaders and/or staff involved with junior apprenticeship programmes (hybrid/online meetings)
- Meetings with college leaders and junior apprenticeship programme managers
- Learning walks to visit junior apprenticeship classes and facilities used by these learners – these also provided useful opportunities to engage with learners, parents and staff
- Focus group learner workshops with groups of current Year 10 and Year 11 junior learners attending a range of junior apprenticeship vocational pathways
- Focus group learner workshops with groups of former junior apprenticeship learners who attended and successfully completed their programme at the college
- Scrutiny of a range of information provided by the colleges in relation to junior apprenticeship programmes and learners

Numbers – quantities and proportions

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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