



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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# Delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes

What we plan to do in response to Estyn's report on delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes.

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## Report details

This review was commissioned by the Further Education and Apprenticeships Division on behalf of the Minister for Education and Welsh Language to review the delivery of Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications in apprenticeship programmes.

## Summary of main findings

Delivering ESWs in apprenticeships is a vital part of improving the core skills of learners who may not have thrived in an educational setting first time round. The challenge faced by providers is how best to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, drawing on learners' clear preference for learning through their vocational context, while at the same time preparing them for external assessments which are often unrelated to their vocational background. It is Estyn's opinion that the learning and teaching of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in apprenticeships is unhelpfully skewed towards preparation for external assessment.

Three main factors contribute to this: the short timescales that apprentices have to complete their ESW qualifications, the significant learning challenge often faced by learners to develop the skills needed for their ESW assessments, and an assessment model for ESW qualifications which is largely generic and requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

This presents a dilemma for providers: how best to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, drawing on learners' clear preference for learning through their vocational context, while at the same time preparing them for external assessment which requires learners to apply skills in contexts often

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unrelated to their vocational background.

Providers have developed a range of delivery models which are effective in enabling learners to complete their ESW qualifications. Estyn categorises the models providers are using to deliver ESW qualifications in apprenticeship programmes into six broad categories and outline their advantages and disadvantages.

Most learners had a sound understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy, numeracy and digital skills and many were clear about their progress and what they needed to do to improve. Most learners in Estyn's visits and online questionnaire reported receiving helpful support and feedback from their tutors or assessors, which helped them understand what they needed to do to improve and actions they needed to complete to do so. In the sessions Estyn observed, the majority of learners made steady progress in developing the skills that were being addressed in that session.

However, Estyn identified three areas, related to the narrow focus on assessment, where the quality of learning was a concern. The first is learners' ability to retain the skills that they have developed. This is summarised by one learner's comment: 'I learn it for the test and then instantly forget it.' The second is that learning is largely focused on preparing for external assessment tasks, reducing the skills being learnt to 'things needed to get through the test', rather than 'useful skills that will help me in my work or wider life'. The third is the extent to which learners are able to apply the skills they have learnt to help them in their job roles or wider lives. This means that learners are not developing, to the fullest extent they could, the skills that would be most helpful to them in their work or in their wider lives.

While providers are effective in enabling learners to attain the ESW qualifications they need for their framework, learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy do not continue to develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills consistently.

Providers reported that failure to attain the ESW qualifications required by their frameworks is not now a significant cause of learners not completing their overall framework. However, learners with additional learning needs or other barriers to learning such as not being a Welsh or English first language speaker may struggle to attain their ESW qualifications, and this is a barrier to them achieving overall framework success.

Very few apprentices carry out assessments for ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh. Overall, providers are not working in partnership well enough to support learners who wish to study their ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh.

## **Recommendations**

### **The Welsh Government**

The Welsh Government should:

#### **Recommendation 1**

Work with Qualifications Wales and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research to review the use of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeships.

#### **Recommendation 2**

Refresh the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) and resources.

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### **Recommendation 3**

Working with partners, develop opportunities for professional learning to enhance practitioners' understanding of the pedagogy and capacity to deliver essential skills.

### **Response to recommendations 1 to 3**

The Welsh Government accepts these recommendations as set out in the Estyn thematic review report.

The Welsh Government will work with Qualifications Wales and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, when established, to review the use of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeships. Qualifications Wales has already initiated a review of Essential Skills Wales qualifications which will be completed in September 2024. The purpose of the review is to gather evidence on the overall effectiveness of Essential Skills Wales qualifications and to assess to what extent the content and assessment arrangements in the qualifications are valid, reliable, manageable and engaging. The ambition is to ascertain what changes to the qualifications are needed in the future to ensure they more fully meet the needs of all stakeholders. Officials will continue to work alongside Qualifications Wales to assess the impact on the apprenticeship programmes.

Regarding recommendation 2 the Welsh Government has contracted Tribal Limited to develop and deliver the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit. During the current contract, Tribal is developing the next version of WEST (WEST 2.0), which will be released during 2024.

The Welsh Government is already supporting the professional development of the post-16 workforce. Officials are working with stakeholders across the sector

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to provide opportunities for staff to develop their skills. The Welsh Government is developing tools to support use of the professional standards and will continue to work with the sector to develop pedagogy across the post-16 workforce.

## **Work-based learning apprenticeship providers**

Work-based learning apprenticeship providers should:

### **Recommendation 4**

Develop partnership working approaches to ensure that:

- learners have meaningful opportunities to study and take assessments bilingually or through the medium of Welsh
- learners' additional learning needs are promptly identified, evaluated and appropriately supported

### **Recommendation 5**

Ensure that learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy continue to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

### **Recommendation 6**

Offer professional learning that develops tutors' and assessors' pedagogy to deliver essential skills.

## Response to recommendations 4 to 6

The Welsh Government supports recommendations 4 to 6 for apprenticeship providers as set out in the Estyn thematic review report.

The Welsh Government, with apprenticeship providers, will agree practical actions that can be taken to tackle the issue of learners having meaningful opportunities to study and take assessments bilingually or through the medium of Welsh and learners' additional learning needs are promptly identified, evaluated and appropriately supported.

The recommendations arising from this review will inform the action plan. This will include supporting the collaborative work by the further education sector to develop resources, professional learning and research to ensure a consistent approach to the development of tutors' and assessors' pedagogy to deliver essential skills.

In addition, the action plan will consider support for learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy continue to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

## Lead providers

Lead providers should:

## Recommendation 7

Ensure that self-evaluation reflects on the effectiveness of the delivery models in use across the provider's partners and sub-contractors and takes action to reduce the potential disadvantages identified in this report.

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## Response to recommendation 7

The Welsh Government supports recommendations 7 for lead providers as set out in the Estyn thematic review report.

The Welsh Government will work with lead providers to ensure self-evaluation reflects on the effectiveness of the delivery models. This will be carried out via existing contract management and monitoring processes. Where shortcomings are identified, officials will work with the lead contractors to remedy issues to ensure a more consistent and effective approach to delivery.

## Publication details

The report was [published on Estyn's website](#) on 21 November 2023.

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