Estyn

A report on the work based learning provision of

Gower College Swansea

Tycoch Road
Swansea
SA2 9EB

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by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

This report is also available in Welsh

About Gower College Swansea

Gower College Swansea works in partnership with seven subcontractors to deliver apprenticeship programmes across west, south, mid and north Wales. Current subcontractors include Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service, XR Training & Consultancy, Mudiad Meithrin, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, Big Learning Company, The Construction Hub Academy Wales and S&A Academy. The provider also works in partnership with two higher education institutions for the delivery of degree apprenticeships in software engineering and electrical and mechanical engineering.

The provider has achieved substantial growth in its apprenticeship provision since 2016, from around 250 learners to approximately 3000 in 2022-2023. Gower College Swansea's current contract for the delivery of work-based learning (WBL) apprenticeship programmes has a value of £10.5m in 2023 to 2024.

Gower College Swansea and its partners deliver apprenticeships in the following sectors at levels 2 to 5:

- Business, Administration and Law
- Construction, Planning and the Built Environment
- Education and Training
- Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies
- Hair and Beauty
- Health, Public Services and Care
- Information and Communication Technology
- Leisure, Travel and Tourism
- Retailing and Customer Service

At the time of the inspection, the provider has approximately 2,280 work-based apprenticeship learners undertaking training on Welsh Government-funded apprenticeship programmes. The largest sector areas of provision are health and social care, management, information advice and guidance, construction and housing. Approximately 85% of apprenticeship provision is delivered directly by the college with the remaining 15% being delivered through its network of subcontractors.

Summary

Many apprentices produce work in line with the level and stage of their apprenticeship. Overall, they demonstrate sound recall of prior learning and apply this well to new contexts. Nearly all respect and value the contributions of their peers, assessors and tutors and most interact confidently in both group and one-to-one sessions. Most learners develop valuable practical skills and many produce work to a good standard and respond positively to written and verbal feedback. Framework and timely success rates vary substantially across and within subject sectors.

Gower College Swansea uses its employer network well to match learners to apprenticeship vacancies. Induction processes are thorough and effective in helping settle learners into their apprenticeship programme well. Tutors and assessors know their learners well and most learners value the support they receive from them. Systems to identify and support learners with additional learning needs (ALN) are particularly effective.

The provider works well in partnership with seven subcontractors to offer a broad and responsive range of apprenticeship provision. Sector advisory boards are particularly impactful in helping shape new apprenticeship routes to meet employers' needs.

In most cases, on- and off-the-job learning experiences are planned well and complement each other. Many tutors and assessors use an appropriate variety of teaching and assessment methods that suit the learners' needs and abilities, and the qualification requirements for their programmes. A minority of assessors do not give sufficient focus to how learners develop literacy, digital and especially numeracy skills, through the context of their work.

A comprehensive and useful meeting structure is in place to monitor performance and compliance of internal and external delivery partners. Where senior leaders and governors identify issues of underperformance, appropriate interventions are implemented to support improvement. However, processes and systems to inform and support quality assurance and self-evaluation are not always effective. Annual conferences and regular inset days are planned effectively to support development areas and are accessible to all staff.

Recommendations

    R1   Improve the rates at which apprentices achieve their frameworks and ensure that all apprentices successfully complete on time

    R2   Review and strengthen the effectiveness of key processes and systems that underpin performance monitoring, self-evaluation and improvement planning, including how the views of learners are taken into account

    R3   Ensure that all learners develop their literacy and numeracy skills through their vocational context

What happens next

The provider will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare case studies on its work for dissemination on Estyn's website, in relation to:

- the development and impact of sector employer boards
- providing effective support for apprentices with additional learning needs

Main findings

Learning

Many apprentices make appropriate progress in their learning over time. They are aware if they are progressing suitably or whether they are behind with their work. Within off-the-job theory and practical sessions, they produce work in line with the level and stage of their apprenticeship.

In off-the-job sessions, review meetings and when undertaking their job roles, many learners demonstrate sound recall of prior learning and apply this to new contexts well. Many learners are knowledgeable about their job roles and frequently reflect on their workplace practice and responsibilities in the context of new learning. They explain clearly how theory relates to their workplaces. For example, childcare learners consider risk mitigation measures at nursery settings, and electrical installation learners reflect on the wall structures and construction methods in different domestic settings that they have encountered.

A few learners demonstrate an insightful awareness of the strengths and challenges in their own ways of working. For example, an apprentice with additional learning needs describes the learning and working styles that they have found to be most effective and how the assessor can help them to be productive.

Nearly all learners respect and value the contributions of their peers, their assessors and tutors and most learners are confident when interacting in group and one-to-one sessions. Many learners are articulate and use technical language and terminology appropriately. For example, carpentry learners explain clearly to their peers the techniques they use to fit doors on-site.

Most learners demonstrate professional behaviours and are valued members of their employer's workforce. However, the attendance of construction and built environment apprentices at off-the-job workshop and classroom sessions is inconsistent.

A few learners take the initiative to identify and solve problems to benefit their colleagues and employers. For example, an apprentice laboratory technician explains and demonstrates the operation of a new data recording system they developed to improve efficiencies at their workplace.

In off-the-job sessions, where relevant, most learners develop valuable practical skills that either apply directly to their job roles or will apply as they progress in their careers. They follow specifications closely and many work to a good standard showing skill when working with a range of apparatus and dexterity when using hand tools. For example, electrical installation apprentices pay close attention to functionality and aesthetic considerations when wiring electrical consumer units, and carpentry apprentices install door fittings to a professional standard. A few learners demonstrate particularly high levels of skill and attention to detail, they enjoy the sense of satisfaction that comes with a job done well. These learners often go on to develop their skills further as part of preparations for local and national skills competitions. For example, plastering apprentices skilfully produce intricate complex geometric patterns whilst ensuring minimal waste.

Through their written work, many learners describe their roles and explain well how different approaches apply to the workplace. Many learners' written responses address the topics at hand appropriately, and a minority provide comprehensive and clear explanations and descriptions. Many respond positively to written and verbal feedback by improving their work or their practice.

Many learners present their written work appropriately, with sound spelling and grammar. However, a few make repeated basic errors in spelling and grammar. A few higher level learners do not reference their sources appropriately.

A few learners demonstrate positive attitudes towards developing their Welsh language skills. A majority of learners who enrol with low levels of Welsh language fluency undertake the Prentis-Iaith self-study units in line with the provider's policy. Increasingly, the learners who are fluent in Welsh undertake their literacy and numeracy qualifications in Welsh or bilingually. However, overall, very few learners develop their Welsh as part of their vocational learning.

Many learners confidently and competently work digitally and remotely when it is beneficial to do so. They contribute well to online review meetings and teaching sessions. Leadership and management apprentices and apprentices in health and care settings explain clearly how the time savings and ability to work from different locations benefit them in terms of progressing in their studies and being productive in their job roles.

Across the provision, the progress that learners make in developing their numeracy skills is variable. As a result, a minority of learners struggle to undertake related tasks and they do not take enough care when working with number to help them avoid errors. For example, engineering and built environment learners make too many mathematical errors, which limits their progress in these technical disciplines.

Since the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, recent nationally validated published outcomes information for apprenticeship programmes is currently only available for 2021-2022. In that year, a majority of the provider's higher and level 3 apprentices successfully achieved their frameworks and just over half of foundation level apprentices achieved their frameworks. When compared to published national outcomes for the same year, framework success rates were strong for health, public services and care, particularly among higher apprentices. Framework success rates were weak for ICT, business administration and law, and also for foundation apprenticeships in engineering and manufacturing technologies. The provider's own data showed that, of those who successfully completed their frameworks, around half took longer than expected to do so.

Well-being, support and guidance

The provider offers useful initial advice and guidance to learners before and during enrolment. It uses its employer network well to match learners to apprenticeship vacancies, including inviting employers to speak to college learners about their apprenticeship programmes and supporting learners to access opportunities on the apprenticeship vacancy service.

The provider delivers a thorough induction process and provides a useful learner handbook, which gives learners the key information about their apprenticeship framework and helps them understand the availability of support on offer. Many learners say that they receive good information when choosing their learning programme and that their induction helped them settle into the apprenticeship programme.

Tutors and assessors know their learners well and adopt their approaches sensitively to suit individual learner support needs and learning styles. Most learners get good support from assessors and tutors, who routinely check in on their well-being and are available to support them both inside and outside of sessions.

In a few cases, learners access specific well-being support, such as counselling services, through dedicated learning coaches and an online mental health support service. However, procedures for recording and sharing information about well-being support are not followed consistently by all delivery teams.

The provider has recently developed a useful well-being toolkit for apprentices that promotes positive mental health and well-being, providing learners with access to a wide range of support agencies, though it is too early to demonstrate the impact of this on learners' well-being.

The provider has highly effective systems in place to identify and support learners with additional learning needs (ALN). Learners with an identified ALN are allocated to a specialist neurodiversity team, who provide them with regular contact and bespoke

support such as specialist software, reading apps, assistive technology and exam access arrangements. The provider makes effective use of a specialist external agency to provide enhanced diagnostic assessments for learning needs such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD.

The provider regularly tracks the progress of learners accessing ALN support to check that they remain on track to complete their apprenticeships frameworks. ALN teams communicate regularly with assessors and tutors on the support being provided to learners, although this information is not systematically available to all delivery staff.

Through targeted professional learning, the provider has supported delivery teams to better identify learners that have not disclosed an ALN on enrolment. As a result, assessors and tutors confidently and sensitively ensure that most learners with ALN get access to the support they need.

Learners accessing ALN provision say that the support they receive not only helps them progress towards completing their apprenticeships but also increases their confidence and self-esteem. One learner commented, 'I used to think there was something wrong with me, but since joining the apprenticeship and accessing support I have realised that my dyslexia is not a problem, it's just about how I work'.

The provider's work to take account of the views of learners is weak. The provider issues learner surveys at induction, mid-point and end of programme. However, response rates are very poor and very few learners recall having completed a survey. Learners can also feedback their views via their e-portfolio system, however, meaningful use of this facility is limited to one sector subject area and a few learners. As a result, the provider does not have a clear overall understanding of learners' views on what elements of its provision work well and what could be improved.

The provider and its external partners have suitable policies and procedures relating to safeguarding and they manage safeguarding matters appropriately. The provider has appropriate procedures for checking the suitability of its own staff and external partners who are in contact with learners.

The provider ensures that all staff, including external partners, undertake appropriate training on safeguarding. This includes a strong focus at the most recent annual staff conference on safeguarding and preventing extremism. Designated safeguarding lead officers have undertaken necessary training and they regularly disseminate useful information on local and regional prevent issues to wider delivery staff.

Nearly all learners feel safe and free from harassment in their workplace and demonstrate a sound understanding of who they should contact if they have any safeguarding concerns. The provider ensures that, during induction, learners receive appropriate online training on subjects such as safeguarding and radicalisation. As a result, many learners show a clear understanding of how to keep themselves safe and, in the best cases, learners can relate the relevance of safeguarding through real-life application to their role.

Overall, the provider's arrangements for safeguarding learners meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Teaching, training, assessment and learning experiences

The provider offers a broad range of provision. They are responsive to the needs of employers in the area and develop new apprenticeship routes accordingly. For example, the provider has recently established new routes in peri-operative care for surgical health care assistants, translation services and floor covering technicians.

The provider uses its eight employer boards effectively. These sector advisory boards contribute useful labour market intelligence, advise on potential new programmes and act as an effective sounding board for provision planning. The digital employer board, for example, has led to five new apprenticeship routes being developed to support growth areas in the local digital economy.

The lead provider works with seven external delivery partners who add breadth by offering specialist provision in sectors that the main provider largely does not. For example, provision offered through the Urdd or Mudiad Meithrin gives Welsh-medium or bilingual opportunities for learners wishing to work in the sports-coaching and childcare sectors.

Provision planning takes careful account of progression, and apprenticeship routes allow learners to progress in their learning and job roles. There is a good balance of provision at foundation, apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship levels.

The provider employs a range of delivery models to enable learners to attain the Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications needed for their apprenticeship. In progress reviews and taught off-the-job sessions, assessors and tutors also encourage learners who have already attained their ESW qualifications to reflect on how they use their digital, literacy and numeracy skills in their work contexts and to continue to develop them beyond their formal taught skills sessions. However, this approach is applied inconsistently across the provision and not all learners develop these skills to the extent that they could.

The provider offers a range of ways in which learners can undertake their apprenticeships, or components of their apprenticeships, bilingually or through the medium of Welsh. Useful partnership working with the Urdd gives the opportunity for learners to complete their ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh. The provider has identified Welsh-speaking staff who wish to develop their capacity to teach bilingually or in Welsh and supports them well, through mentoring, and a range of professional learning.

In priority sector areas and pan-Wales provision, the provider works hard to recruit, or develop, Welsh-speaking staff with the aim that there is a Welsh medium option available. For learners who are developing Welsh speakers or fluent speakers who lack confidence, the provider uses Prentis-Iaith materials to help them develop skills in using Welsh at work. Overall, only a few learners across the provision carry out substantial elements of their programmes bilingually or through the medium of Welsh.

The provider promotes learners' participation in regional, national and international skills competitions. For those sectors that particate, this brings a valuable opportunity

for learners and staff to develop high level skills and the supporting pedagogy to teach them.

Most apprenticeships include an element of off-the-job teaching, which provides learners with a useful opportunity to build their knowledge, and learn, practise and develop skills that they may not be able to do in the workplace. In most cases, on- and off-the-job learning experiences are well planned and complement each other well. However, in a few sector areas, staff do not co-ordinate or communicate information about the content of off-the job learning and learners' progress effectively, inhibiting the ability of assessors to monitor learners' progress overall.

Tutors and assessors demonstrate strong subject knowledge, coupled with a wide range of vocational skills and experience, and provide helpful bridges between classroom learning and examples from the workplace and industry.

Many tutors and assessors plan learning activities well. They create inclusive learning environments. They use an appropriate variety of teaching and assessment methods that suit the needs learners' needs and abilities, and the qualification requirements for their programmes. However, in a few cases, teaching in off-the-job sessions lacks variety and relies too heavily on long presentations during which learners' interest and engagement fades.

In most sessions, tutors and assessors use questioning effectively to confirm understanding, maintain an appropriate pace of sessions and support learners' focus and engagement. In a very few cases, however, they do not use questioning enough to help learners stay focused, or they allow whole group questioning phases to become dominated by one or two learners, meaning that not all learners contribute.

Most tutors and assessors are aware of their learners' preferences for learning and of learners' additional learning needs. They tailor their approaches accordingly. For example, in a review session with a vocationally-competent learner with ADHD who has difficulty organising thoughts coherently, the assessor skilfully summarises the learner's rapid responses and helps them reflect and restructure the content in a way that meets the assessment criteria.

In on-the-job sessions, assessors carry out useful reviews with their learners. They check on learners' progress, provide useful vocational guidance and carry out assessments of vocational competence. Most provide useful verbal or written feedback, which allows learners to know what they need to do to improve. They check on learners' welfare, well-being and safety and make sure that learners know where to go if they need help or support. Most assessors liaise effectively with employers and involve them in the review process.

A minority of assessors do not give sufficient focus to how learners develop literacy, digital and especially numeracy skills, through the context of their work. The clarity of targets for learners set by assessors and the quality and timeliness of assessors' record keeping of reviews is inconsistent. In a few sector areas, review forms are not completed consistently or fully and, as a result, learners' targets are not recorded or formally tracked.

Assessors and tutors use online delivery appropriately and effectively to carry out reviews, hold conversations with learners and to deliver teaching sessions. In most online sessions, tutors and assessors use a range of suitable teaching techniques, including collaborative planning approaches and synchronous work on documents to maintain learners' interest and engagement.

Leadership and management

Gower College Swansea works well in partnership with seven subcontractors to grow and develop a wide range of apprenticeship programmes. The provider structures its apprenticeship delivery provision through a combination of internal and external delivery partners. College departments are usefully referred to as internal delivery partners while subcontractors are recognised as external delivery partners.

Apprenticeship provision is delivered predominately through direct delivery by the college, including GCS Training, which operates as the college's business training arm. External delivery partners are selected carefully for their specialist expertise which supports provision well in areas such as laboratory technician and digital apprenticeship programmes. All new subcontracting arrangements are subject to robust due diligence processes ensuring comprehensive oversight and formal approval by the college's governing board.

Leaders and managers provide appropriate strategic leadership and operational management of apprenticeship provision. Senior and middle leaders engage effectively with local, regional and national bodies to ensure that apprenticeship provision appropriately reflects priorities at these levels.

The provider's principal and chief executive is an active member of the regional learning and skills partnership and represents colleges within the region. This involvement has helped facilitate collaboration with local employers to create innovative bespoke apprenticeship programmes. Examples include programmes in the clinical perioperative, digital and floor covering areas as well as for learners working in housing associations. The provider is currently the only provider in Wales offering the housing apprenticeship.

In addition, the provider has established a series of highly effective sector specific employer boards to support employer engagement. The provider also ensures programmes with low numbers of learners continue to be supported to meet the needs of employers where appropriate. The employer boards are particularly effective in facilitating two-way communication between the provider and employers to inform curriculum planning and delivery.

The internal college delivery of apprenticeships is embedded within the departmental and faculty structure, with clear links to functional and learner support teams. Where this works well, effective communication and interaction between delivery staff ensures strong support and monitoring of learner progress. However, the effectiveness of these arrangements varies substantially across departments. Leaders recognise this variability and are actively implementing targeted improvement measures and intervention to address these inconsistencies.

Where senior leaders and governors identify issues of underperformance, appropriate interventions are implemented to support improvement. For example, targeted remedial actions were implemented when performance issues within a delivery partner operating as a subsidiary company of the college was identified. This led to the eventual dissolution of the subsidiary company and the transfer of some aspects of provision and associated delivery staff under the direct control of the college.

The provider employs a comprehensive and useful meeting structure, which facilitates senior and middle managers' collaboration from all provision areas to monitor performance and compliance. Monitoring processes underpinning regular performance monitoring arrangements currently focus too narrowly on funding and compliance issues and do not fully encompass broader aspects such as key performance indicators, observations, self-evaluation and comprehensive improvement planning.

Overall, leaders and mangers identify key strengths and areas for development across the provision appropriately. However, processes and systems to inform and support quality assurance and self-evaluation are not always effective. Arrangements for improvement planning and progress monitoring do not identify key performance measures and indicators comprehensively and with sufficient precision, and improvement plans lack clear and specific short, medium and long-term targets for improvement.

Leaders demonstrate a commitment to developing and improving management systems and resources to support development of continuous quality improvement across all delivery areas. The college utilises external funding support to effectively facilitate these developments. However, the use of these systems is still under development and it is too early to evaluate their impact.

Tutors and assessors model and promote professional values and behaviours well within their vocational areas. These practitioners collaborate effectively with a range of external organisations to enhance learning, assessment and support activities. However, the provider acknowledges that processes and systems for gathering feedback from learners and employers is ineffective and require further development. The provider recognises that, as their provision has grown, some systems are no longer fit for purpose and this presents significant capacity and resource challenges.

Annual conferences and regular training days, focused specifically on apprenticeships, are planned effectively to support development areas identified through quality compliance reviews and these events are accessible to both internal and external delivery partners. Recent themes include safeguarding, well-being and improving learner progress review processes. The provider engages external specialists where appropriate to facilitate worthwhile collaborative sessions, such as in activities in relation to safeguarding and the launch of a well-being toolkit. This enables practitioners from a diverse range of sectors to enhance and develop professional practice when supporting learners.

The provider has recently developed their strategic training and support programme to benefit all practitioners including newly appointed as well as experienced practitioners and managers. This supports the aim to reduce staff turnover and

support internal progression. The overall recruitment strategy endeavours to maintain a strong workforce of specialised practitioners with up-to-date knowledge and experience within their vocational areas. However, recruitment in shortage subject areas such as construction and the built environment remains particularly challenging.

Evidence base of the report

Before the inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the learner and employer questionnaires and consider the views of teachers, trainers and assessors through their questionnaire responses

During the inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet the principal/chief executive, governors (where appropriate), senior and middle managers and individual teachers, trainers and assessors to evaluate the impact of the provider's work
- meet learners to discuss their work, to listen to them and to gain their views about various aspects of their provider
- visit a broad sample of sessions, including off-the-job, theory and practical training sessions
- visit a broad range of learners in their workplaces to observe their workplace skills, observe assessments, review their theory work and meet their employers
- look closely at the provider's self-evaluation processes
- consider the provider's quality improvement plan and looked at evidence to show how well the provider had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a wide range of provider documents, including information on learner assessment, tracking and progress, records of meetings of managers and staff, meeting with sub-contractors and key partners and meetings with employers, information on learners' well-being, including the safeguarding of learners, and records of staff training and professional learning

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the partnership and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 77 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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