Karen Adam MSP
Convener
Education and Gaelic Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh

Dear Convener,

Foundation Apprenticeships: Response to Evidence Presented by James Withers

I write as Chair of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) Foundation Apprenticeship and Skills Sub-Group regarding evidence provided by James Withers to the Committee on 10 November 2026 concerning Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs).

We are concerned that a number of assertions made in Mr Withers evidence present an inaccurate picture of Foundation Apprenticeships and risk creating a misleading impression and understanding of one of Scotland's most successful education and skills programmes, one which is delivering positive outcomes for young people, employers and communities across Scotland.

We would encourage the Committee to consider the substantial research evidence base and practitioner experience that demonstrates the impact and value of FAs. As Scotland seeks to reform education, strengthen workforce planning, improve productivity and create a more coherent skills system, Foundation Apprenticeships are not part of the problem but an important part of the solution.

Foundation Apprenticeships Deliver Many of the Outcomes Mr Withers Seeks
There is a striking contradiction between several of Mr Withers' recommendations and the evidence on Foundation Apprenticeships.

Research and experience from across Scotland as well as internationally show that Foundation Apprenticeships are central to the development of an integrated Career Pathways Programme of the type advocated by organisations such as the OECD and increasingly recognised as essential to delivering education reform, economic growth and public service transformation.

Evidence demonstrates that a systemic approach to work-based learning through Foundation Apprenticeships contributes to:

- improved attainment
- increased engagement and attendance
- strong positive destinations
- enhanced wellbeing
- increased confidence and aspirations
- stronger transitions into employment, apprenticeships and further learning

These benefits are particularly significant for young people who may otherwise be at risk of disengagement or non-positive destinations.

We therefore find it concerning that FAs have been presented as something that should be diminished or reclassified when the evidence suggests they should instead be expanded and embedded within a national career pathways framework.

A Question of Understanding
Mr Withers stated that Foundation Apprenticeships are "school qualifications incorporating workplace experience, rather than employment-based apprenticeships."

This statement raises legitimate questions about whether there is a full understanding of the purpose, design and role of Foundation Apprenticeships within Scotland's education and skills system.

Whilst Foundation Apprenticeships are undertaken during the senior phase of schooling, they are much more than qualifications with workplace experience. They are employer-designed programmes based on recognised occupational standards, providing young people with meaningful industry experience, technical skills development and progression opportunities into employment, Modern Apprenticeships, Graduate Apprenticeships, colleges and universities.

Foundation Apprenticeships are designed to be ‘employment based apprenticeships’. Reducing FAs to simply "school qualifications" fundamentally misunderstands both their purpose and value.

No Evidence to Support Claims of Inferiority
We note that Mr Withers' evidence implied that Foundation Apprenticeships may possess a lower status than traditional academic qualifications.

There is no substantive evidence to support this view.

Where opportunities are available, Foundation Apprenticeships are frequently oversubscribed. Young people, parents and employers consistently demonstrate strong demand for greater access to FAs. This demand reflects the high regard in which these qualifications are held.

Indeed, some of Scotland's leading institutions have already demonstrated genuine parity of esteem between vocational and academic learning. One notable example is the University of Aberdeen Medical School, which recognises the Foundation Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care as equivalent to an A grade Higher for entry to Medicine alongside the science, mathematics and English qualifications.

This represents genuine parity of esteem in practice, not theory.

Retaining the Foundation Apprenticeship Name
We are also concerned by proposals to change the terminology associated with Foundation Apprenticeships and other established qualifications.

Research and engagement with young people, parents and employers demonstrate that stakeholders understand what a Foundation Apprenticeship is, value the brand and wish the name to remain.

While we strongly support the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the role it plays, this does not mean we need to necessarily change qualification names.

Scotland has developed qualification titles that are widely recognised and understood by learners, families, employers and institutions. Replacing familiar and respected qualifications with generic descriptions or level-based terminology risks increasing confusion rather than reducing it.

Changing established names such as National Qualifications, Highers, Advanced Highers and Foundation Apprenticeships would require a compelling evidence base demonstrating clear educational benefit. We have seen no such evidence presented.

More importantly, we would question how changing qualification titles would contribute to improving attainment, raising aspirations, increasing attendance and engagement, enhancing wellbeing or strengthening outcomes for young people.

Scotland Must Strengthen Integration, Not Separation
What is required is a systemic, OECD style, Career Pathways Programme.

We agree that Scotland's education and skills landscape is and can appear fragmented and that reform is necessary. However, we strongly disagree with any proposal that would increase separation between school and post-school learning.

The future lies in greater integration, not greater division as Mr Withers advocates.

A coherent, lifelong Career Pathways Programme should:

- tackle educational and social inequality
- address workforce and skills shortages
- support priority economic sectors
- strengthen public service reform
- improve progression into employment and learning
- reduce long-term reliance on employability and support services

Foundation Apprenticeships are already making significant contributions in each of these areas.

Removing them from the centre of the system or diminishing their role would represent a significant step backwards for Scottish education and skills policy.

Foundation Apprenticeships as a Strategic Enabler of Reform
The Scottish Government's education reform agenda and Public Service Reform strategy create a major opportunity to establish a nationally coherent Career Pathways Programme with Foundation Apprenticeships at its heart.

Such an approach would:

- provide consistent, high-quality pathways into priority sectors
- strengthen employer engagement and leadership
- support workforce renewal across public and private sectors

- simplify progression into employment, apprenticeships, colleges and universities
- address regional and national skills shortages
- support sustainable economic growth

In our view, Foundation Apprenticeships should not only be retained but expanded as a universal entitlement available to all young people who wish to participate.

Foundation Apprenticeships also provide investment benefits and should be central to Public Service Reform. Investment in young people through systemic FAs is not simply the right thing to do. It is one of the smartest economic investments we can make.

Request to the Committee
Given the significant concerns outlined above, and the risk that Committee members may not have received a balanced picture of Foundation Apprenticeships, we respectfully request that the Committee consider the extensive evidence base that exists regarding their impact and effectiveness.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide the Committee with a formal evidence session and submit further research and data from ADES, SOLACE, local authorities, employers, education partners and young people themselves.

We believe it is essential that future discussions on education reform, apprenticeships and career pathways are informed by robust evidence, practical experience and the demonstrated outcomes being achieved across Scotland.

We would therefore ask the Committee to invite representatives from ADES and/or SOLACE to present evidence on Foundation Apprenticeships and their role within a future national Career Pathways Programme.

We would be pleased to provide further information and supporting evidence at the Committee's convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Linda McAulay-Griffiths
Director of Education and Skills and Chief Education Officer
East Ayrshire Council