



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Building our communities

Apprenticeships boom as programme grows

By Katie Macleod

Distilling gin. Designing brand graphics. Learning the ins and outs of managing a business. Getting to grips with engineering. All these skills – and more – are being mastered by young people in the Western Isles who are both studying and learning on the job thanks to apprenticeships at all levels.

And this month, the apprenticeship opportunities in the islands are expanding again, with the launch of six new Foundation Apprenticeships in the Senior Phase, for pupils in S4-S6.

"We've done a lot of work with the four presenting centres through the Skills Development Scotland (SDS) Foundation Apprenticeship Programme," explains Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Apprenticeship Manager, Dolina Smith.

Available in the senior phase at SCQF Level 6 (some can be at the same level as Highers), the two-year Foundation Apprenticeships are industry-recognized qualifications which combine classroom learning with work placements that develop technical workplace knowledge and valuable on-the-job experience.

Nationally, SDS offers 12 Foundation Apprenticeship courses, known as "frameworks," and six that closely fit the Western Isles' economic priorities will run from this month in three of the islands four secondary schools: Sgoil Lionacleit, Sir E Scott School, and The Nicolson Institute. The Foundation Apprenticeships will operate on a harmonised timetable, taught both by the Accredited Training and Skills Department at the Comhairle, and teachers in the schools themselves.

Dolina says they are "delighted" to have 55 secondary school pupils registered for the courses, courses which include Social Services and Healthcare; Social Services, Children and Young People; Business Skills; Food and Drink; Engineering; and Creative and Digital Media. For the first time, the latter will be delivered in Gaelic as well as English.

"We went out to talk to the community, to the local economy, to see what businesses needed, what their drivers were, and where their current and future skills shortages were," she explains. "So we've matched that to the offer, working closely with the private sector and the schools to make sure that the young people are leaving with employable skills. It will give them options to go straight into employment, to go into further education, university, or an apprenticeship."

The Foundation Apprenticeships are the latest development in the Comhairle's ever-expanding apprenticeship programme, which offers apprenticeships in multiple industries. There are a mix of Modern Apprenticeships, which are funded by Skills Development Scotland, and Comhairle-funded apprenticeships run independently from SDS. Qualifications are available at a wide variety of levels, from SVQ to post-graduate degree, and all apprenticeships offer a structured Gaelic tuition programme. "The Comhairle is grateful to Bòrd na Gàidhlig for their financial support through the GLIAF fund which allows them to make such an extensive offer to all apprentices, no matter what their level of fluency is," adds Dolina.

As of August, there are 86 apprentices (not including those on the new Foundation Apprenticeships) working throughout the Western Isles in both the Comhairle and the private sector. "Through the work with the Developing the Young Workforce we're going out more and more to the

private sector," says Dolina.

A wide range of local companies currently employ young people as part of the apprenticeship programme, and one of these is Essence of Harris, the award-winning, Tarbert-based candle company.

"The issue with "brain drain" here on the island is still hugely significant and Harris' dwindling population of 1916 residents can largely be attributed to the younger generation moving off-island for employment and opportunities. We wanted to change that reality by offering apprenticeships to local islanders," say Jamie and Deenie MacGowan, who run Essence of Harris, and employ two apprentices, Rebekah Macleod, from Tarbert, and Zoe Macleod, from Scalpay.

"Essence of Harris has benefited hugely from having Rebekah and Zoe in the team," they add. "As a growing SME we are always eager to expand our team and work with new people to grow our brand and continue to innovate. In addition to her role in production, Zoe has been fantastic in designing point of sale posters and social media graphics which has helped us to increase our brand awareness. Rebekah has been developing her entrepreneurial mindset as she completes her business degree and has applied that knowledge into her role at Essence of Harris."

Rebekah started working at Essence of Harris as a summer job during the school holidays and following a stint on the mainland after finishing school, she decided to come home to the island and continue working for Essence of Harris. This time around, however, Jamie and Deenie were keen to develop Rebekah's skills further and worked with her to begin a Business Management degree with the University of Highlands and Islands.

"The apprenticeship has allowed me the freedom to earn a living working at Essence of Harris, whilst gaining a degree in the field I'd always wanted to study in. It's given me the drive to open my own business one day," says Rebekah.

Zoe, who is completing an apprenticeship in Graphic Design, as well as learning hands-on skills working in production, feels similar. "I've always been interested in art and design, and to be able to pursue that passion has been ideal for me. My course is online, so it has given me the flexibility to complete my apprenticeship alongside working in the Essence of Harris factory. I can apply my knowledge into a real-life business situation and that has been really rewarding for me."

A walk along the road through Tarbert leads to the workplace of another apprentice: Rebekah Morrison from Bowglass, an apprentice at The Isle of Harris Distillers. Rebekah has been working as an apprentice at the award-winning distillery since late 2018, working towards a Spirits Industry Vocational Qualification (which is recognized by the Scotch Whisky Association) and learning about all aspects of spirit production.

"The distillery was established with the purpose of providing sustainable employment for Harris and to be a catalyst for economic growth for Harris and the Hebrides. At the heart of this is the hope that young people will see the opportunity to stay on the island for work and to eventually raise their families," says Simon Erlanger, the distillery's Managing Director. "I sit on the Board of Developing the Young Hebridean Workforce and heard from Dolina Smith about the ambition for more island apprentices. It therefore seemed a good idea to create the first ever distilling apprenticeship in the Outer Hebrides.



The Essence of Harris team



Zoe Macleod



Rebekah Macleod



Rebekah Morrison

"After interviewing a number of great candidates, we chose school-leaver Rebekah, first and foremost because she came over so well, but we were also keen to show that the world of distilling does not need to be a male-only domain. She has gone from strength to strength since starting and is developing confidence as well as technical skills. Importantly, she is a wonderful addition to the team."

The scheme's continued growth shows that both local businesses and young people are seeing the value in apprenticeships. As Dolina notes, "There are an abundance of opportunities here at the moment. We need to ensure that we give young people the opportunity to either stay here and progress in their chosen career, or go away to university but come back, because there will be opportunities here."