



Department for the

Economy

An Roinn

Geilleagair

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CAREERS SERVICE

**Careers Occupational
Information Unit**

A Guide to **CAREER ENTRY ROUTES**



Welcome

Are you starting to think about your future career? Maybe you want to try something new, move forward in your current job, or even work for yourself. Or perhaps you are supporting someone else, like a friend, family member, or student.

This Career Entry Routes guide from the [Careers Service](#) explains the different ways you can get started. It shows how you can move through different qualification levels, from **Entry Level up to Level 8**. Depending on what you're interested in, you could choose:

- ▶ **School and college courses**, such as A Levels
- ▶ **Vocational education and training**, such as apprenticeships
- ▶ **Training programmes** funded by the Department for the Economy (DfE) or local councils.

These routes can help you move into employment/self-employment, progress in your career, or build your skills over time.

The [Careers Service Careers Occupational Information Unit \(COIU\)](#) provides up-to-date information about different job sectors in Northern Ireland. These resources include facts about industries, as well as real stories from people who are working or studying locally.

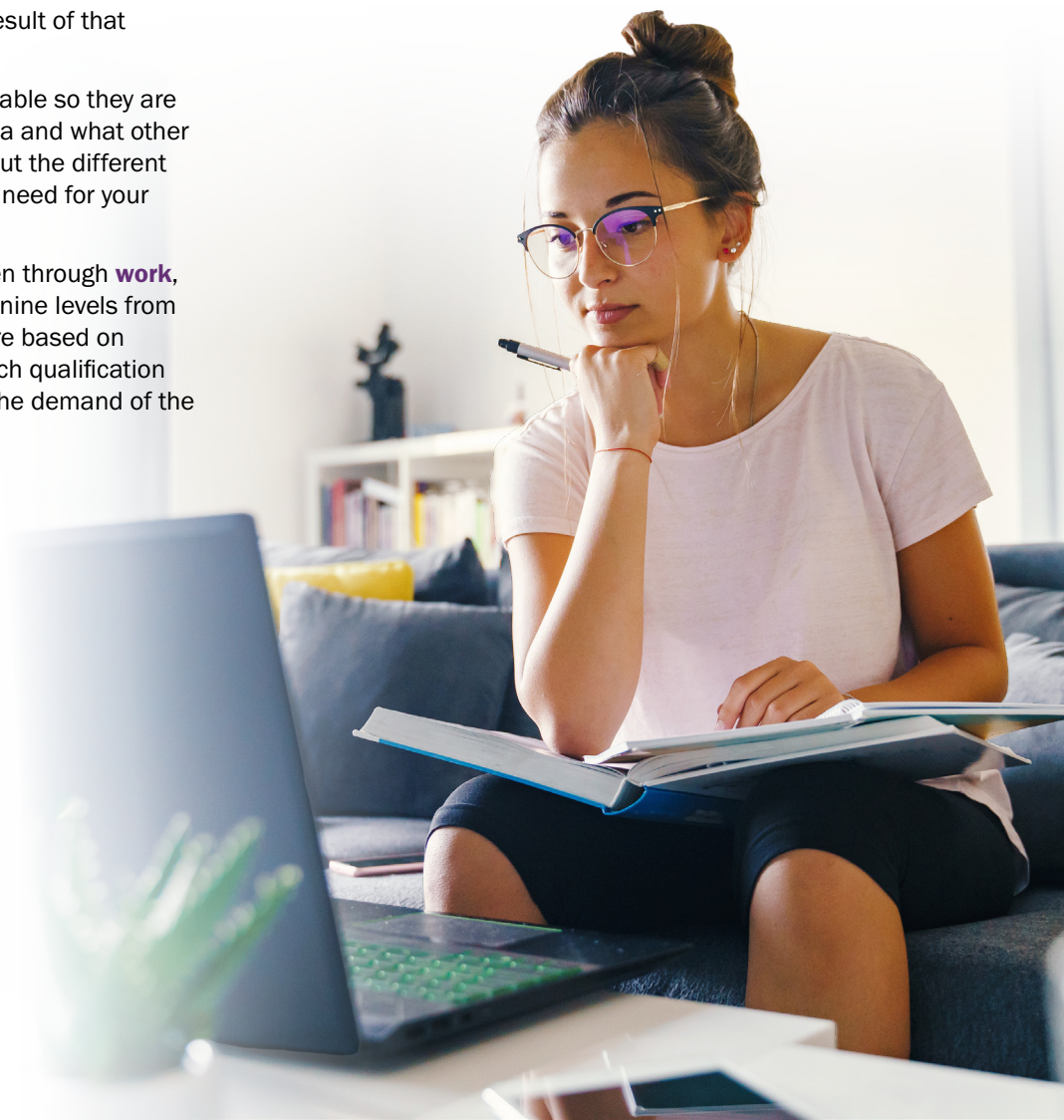
This guide is designed to be used alongside [COIU resources](#) to help you explore your options and plan your future career.

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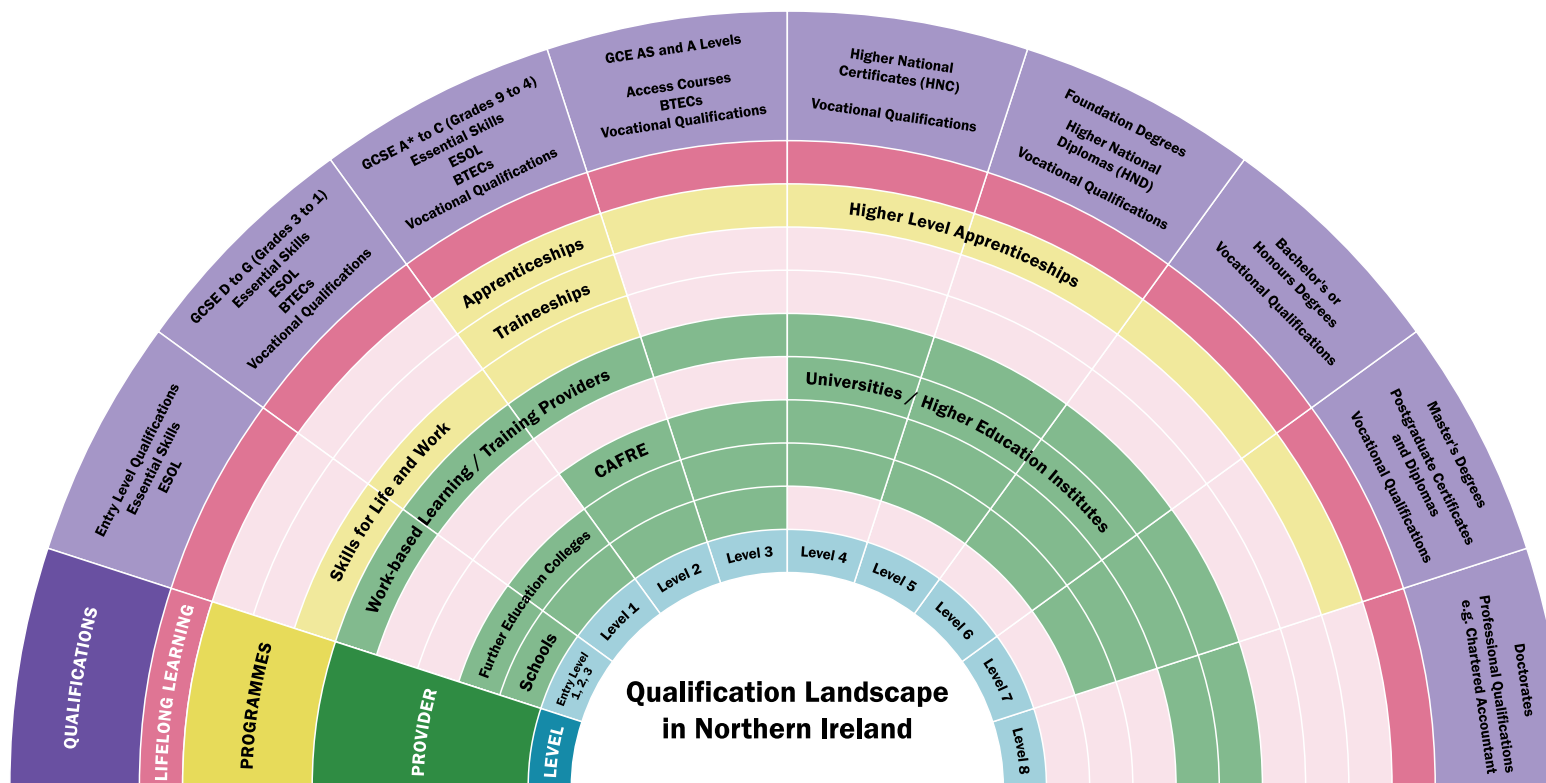
Qualification Levels

- ▶ A qualification shows employers, educators and learners what you have **learnt** and what you can **do** as a result of that learning.
- ▶ There is a wide variety of qualifications available so they are [grouped together into levels](#) based on criteria and what other qualifications they can lead to. Knowing about the different levels means that you can identify what you need for your chosen career.
- ▶ In Northern Ireland, most qualifications taken through **work, school, college** or **university**, fit into one of nine levels from **Entry Level** through to **Level 8**. The levels are based on **knowledge, skills** and **competence** that each qualification assesses. The higher the level, the greater the demand of the qualification.
- ▶ The infographic on the next page shows a summary of progression routes through the levels from Entry Level, up to Level 8. You can find an overview of the different qualifications at each level and links to further information within this guide.



Qualifications Landscape in Northern Ireland

The graphic below shows the qualifications offered in Northern Ireland, up to Level 8.



The above graphic was commissioned by DfE and produced by CCEA Regulation

Qualifications information

Entry Level Qualifications ●●●



- ▶ Entry level qualifications can help **build skills, increase knowledge** and **boost confidence**. They are known as ‘certificates’ or ‘awards’, and are open to anyone interested in gaining a recognised qualification. There are **no entry requirements**.
- ▶ There are **over 100 Entry Level Certificates** to choose from across a **variety of subject areas**.
- ▶ If taken at **school**, you will complete them in Years 11 and 12 (ages 14 to 16). They are also available in **further education colleges** and may be offered in other settings; the **workplace; community groups and organisations** through **voluntary work; prisons** and **young offenders’ institutions; residential** or **daycare settings**.
- ▶ Entry Level qualifications are usually made up of a number of separately assessed **units**.
- ▶ You can study Entry Level Certificates at a pace that suits you and progress from one entry level to the next. There are **three different entry levels**, which reflect attainment in the chosen qualification.
- ▶ At Entry Level 3, qualifications and programmes include but are not limited to: [Key Skills](#); [BTEC](#) Entry 3 vocational study qualifications. They can demonstrate knowledge and skills

which may lead to work-based learning, like an apprenticeship, or straight to [employment](#) (please note - from September 2025, the new Northern Ireland Essentials Skills Qualifications for Digital ICT at Entry Level 3, Level 1 and Level 2 replaced Essential Skills ICT at Levels 1 and 2).

- ▶ ESOL is offered at Entry levels 1, 2 and 3, as well as Pre-ESOL (non accredited) for those with little or no English language skills.

Community Education

- ▶ Community education is learning delivered in local community settings by community and voluntary organisations.
- ▶ Courses often focus on building confidence, developing personal and employability skills, improving Essential Skills, and gaining accredited qualifications.
- ▶ It can be a useful first step towards further learning, training or employment.
- ▶ Community Education courses may include Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 learning opportunities, but this varies between providers.
- ▶ Check with your local community education provider to find out what courses are available and what they can lead to.
- ▶ [AONTAS](#) is a source of information on community education and adult learning opportunities.

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● School ● Further Education College ● Training Provider

To understand how the qualifications/programmes on this page fit within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).

Skills for Life and Work ● ● ●



- ▶ The [Skills for Life and Work](#) training programme provides young people with the opportunity to work towards **recognised qualifications** and gain **valuable work experience**.
- ▶ The programme is open to 16-17 year olds, with **extended eligibility** for persons under 22 years with a disability; or under 25 years for persons from an in-care background.
- ▶ Time is spent in the **workplace**, and also training with a **training** organisation/Further Education College, working towards gaining Entry Level/Level 1 qualifications, and in some cases, Level 2 qualifications.
- ▶ Skills for Life and Work focuses on the **achievement of qualifications** in: personal and social development, employability, professional and technical/vocational, and essential skills in literacy, numeracy and Digital ICT.
- ▶ Skills for Life and Work also aims to facilitate participants' **progression to higher level training**. This could include aiming for the Department's [Traineeship](#) or [Apprenticeship](#) programmes, or other employment.
- ▶ Find out more about [Skills for Life and Work](#).

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● School ● Further Education College ● Training Provider

To understand how the qualifications/programmes on this page fit within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).

Level 1 qualifications ● ● ●



- ▶ An ideal place to start if you're just beginning to learn about a specific subject area, Level 1 qualifications cover **basic knowledge and skills**.
- ▶ Level 1 qualifications are often achieved in Years 11 and 12 at post-primary school, but they're also great for those who want to further their education at a later stage.
- ▶ In addition to [Skills for Life and Work](#), other types of Level 1 qualifications include but are not limited to [GCSE](#) grades D-G (and grades 3 to 1 in England); Level one awards, diplomas and certificates; [Key Skills](#) level 1; [BTEC and OCR Nationals](#) (please note that these are not currently offered in Northern Ireland); Essential Skills; English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Music grades 1 to 3.



Level 2 qualifications



- ▶ Level 2 qualifications show that you have **good knowledge** and **understanding of a subject** and the ability to do a variety of tasks with some guidance or supervision. They are **suitable for many job roles**.
- ▶ Examples of Level 2 qualifications include: [GCSE grades A*- C](#) (and grades 4 to 9 in England); [Level 2 Apprenticeships](#); [Traineeships](#); **Level 2 awards, diplomas and certificates**; [BTEC and OCR Nationals](#); [Essential Skills](#); [ESOL](#); **Music grades 4 and 5** and **0 level - grades A-C** (please note that O levels are legacy qualifications and are no longer offered in the UK).
- ▶ Level 2 qualifications are often achieved in Years 11 and 12 at post-primary school, but they're also great for those who want to further their education at a later stage.

Traineeships* ●



- ▶ A **traineeship** gives you the opportunity to gain valuable **work experience** and knowledge in the sector you are interested in, while also improving your **employability skills, English** and **Maths**. It can help you progress to a full-time [job](#), [apprenticeship](#), or [further education](#).
- ▶ If you undertake the Traineeship, you will study a programme of qualifications working towards a **Traineeship Diploma**. Learners can achieve a full Level 2 outcome and, with the successful achievement of GCSE Maths and English in addition to relevant vocational qualifications at Level 2, are broadly **equivalent to up to five GCSEs at grades A* to C**.
- ▶ You can speak to a [careers adviser](#) or contact your local FE college to find out more about different occupational areas, the qualifications involved, and the routes you can take.
- ▶ [Traineeships](#) will typically take **one to two years** to complete on a full-time basis.
- ▶ You can find more information about Traineeships in the [Traineeships prospectus](#). Details on how to apply are available on the [NI Direct Traineeships](#) page.
- ▶ A traineeship can help you move on to further study, start an apprenticeship, or get a job, depending on what you want to do next and the skills you've gained. Entry requirements can vary depending on the course, apprenticeship, or job, so it's a good idea to check with the college/training provider, or employer, as relevant. A [careers adviser](#) can also help you understand your options and what you need for your next step.

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● Further Education College

*Traineeships are delivered through local Further Education (FE) colleges and combine classroom learning with work experience.

To understand how the qualifications/programmes on this page fit within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).

Apprenticeships ● ●



- ▶ [Apprenticeships](#) can help you to achieve your career goal by developing **relevant skills** and **knowledge**. Apprenticeships offer the opportunity to earn **while you learn**. Working alongside experienced staff, you will receive on-the-job training. You will also receive ‘off-the-job’ training, usually on a day-release basis with a training provider, to work towards achieving vocational qualifications and Essential Skills qualifications.
- ▶ Apprenticeships are offered from **Level 2**, up to **Level 7**. For more information, please see [Types of Apprenticeships](#). To learn more about Level 2 Apprenticeships currently available, please see [Level 2 Apprenticeship Frameworks](#).
- ▶ Please note, if you are interested in becoming an apprentice under the [Apprenticeships programme](#) (or the [Higher Level Apprenticeships programme](#)), **you must find an employer who is willing to take you on** as an apprentice in the occupational area relevant to your chosen apprenticeship, **or have been with your current employer for less than 6 months**.
- ▶ Finding someone to take you on as an apprentice is really like finding any other job. You can, for example:
 - search for apprenticeship opportunities **online**
 - contact your local **Jobs and Benefits office**
 - search on [JobApplyNI](#) ; search the [UCAS CareerFinder tool](#); search **newspapers**; look for vacancies on employer or **recruitment websites**
 - **contact employers** yourself (you should make them aware that you want to start an apprenticeship under the Apprenticeships programme)
 - you can also **contact your local college/training provider**, who may be aware of vacancies
- ▶ Some employers may offer their own **in-house apprenticeship/training schemes**, and these are usually advertised in the local news media.
- ▶ You can find information about apprenticeship providers in your area on the [Find apprenticeship training webpage](#).

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● Further Education College ● Training Provider

To understand how this level of qualification fits within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#)

Level 3 qualifications

Further Education

Level 3 Further Education Courses

- ▶ **Level 3 Further Education (FE) qualifications** are broadly comparable to [AS and A-Levels](#) and include a range of qualifications such as [BTEC and OCR Nationals](#); [VRQs and Access to Higher Education Diplomas](#).
- ▶ It is important if considering a Higher Education course at an FE college/university, that you **research entry requirements** on the relevant college/university websites/[UCAS](#) before you start the course, as not all Level 3 qualifications meet application criteria for courses.

Level 3 Access Courses

- ▶ **Level 3 Access courses** are offered by FE colleges and are designed to provide a pathway to [Higher Education study](#) (such as [HNCs](#), [HNDs](#), [Foundation degrees](#) and [degrees](#)) for students who do not meet the traditional entry criteria. Check out [Routes into Higher Education](#) for more information.
- ▶ There are different Access courses available, depending on which Higher Education course you would like to take. You should **check specific Higher Education course entry criteria**, such as suitable Access courses, with the relevant course provider.
- ▶ Please note that some of the Level 3 Access Diplomas offered across local FE colleges are validated* by [Queen's University Belfast](#), while others are validated* by [Ulster University](#). Please contact course providers directly for further information.

*When an Access course is validated by a university, it means the course has been approved to meet university-level standards. It shows the course is a recognised route that can prepare you for higher education.

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

 School  Further Education College  Training Provider

To understand how the qualifications/programmes on this page fit within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).

A Levels and AS levels ●●🖱️

[Advanced level qualifications \(known as A levels\)](#) are **subject-based qualifications** that can lead to university, further study, training, or work. You can normally study three or more A levels over two years.

- ▶ A Levels are normally studied in **school or at an FE college**.
- ▶ They are also available to study **part-time at FE colleges**.
- ▶ A Levels are the full qualification and are made up of both AS (Advanced Subsidiary) and A2 Levels.
- ▶ The AS (Advanced Subsidiary) Level is usually studied in the first year and is a qualification in its own right.
- ▶ Students can progress to study the A2 level to complete an A Level qualification.
- ▶ Alternatively, you can take all the AS and A2 level units in one year to complete the full A level qualification.
- ▶ You usually need **5 GCSEs at grades A*-C** in order to study AS and A Levels in a school.

Please note that every school sets its own admissions criteria and it's important that you research entry requirements.

Apprenticeships ●●🖱️

Apprenticeships are offered from **Level 2, up to Level 7**. For more information, please see [Types of Apprenticeships](#). To learn more about Level 3 Apprenticeships currently available, please see [Level 3 Apprenticeship Frameworks](#).

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● School ● Further Education College ● Training Provider

To understand how this level of qualification/programme fits within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).

What to do if you are thinking about ApprenticeshipsNI (Level 2 & Level 3) after school

Apprenticeships are paid work (minimum 21 hours per week, including off-the-job training time).

8 steps to an apprenticeship



STEP 1: Explore careers

Research your chosen career using Careers A–Z.

[Careers A-Z list](#) | [nidirect](#)



STEP 2: Check your skills

Find out the skills needed and if the role suits you.

[Choosing or changing career](#) | [nidirect](#)



STEP 3: Use your work experience contacts

If you have work experience, ask about full-time work from September.



STEP 4: Find a provider near you

Check your local FE college or Training Organisation (TO).

[Find apprenticeship training](#) | [nidirect](#)



STEP 5: Contact employers

Phone, message, or email a CV to ask about apprentice roles.



STEP 6: Look for adverts & fairs

Check online and attend job/careers fairs to meet employers.



STEP 7: Attend Apprenticeship Week

Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week takes place in February. This event changes theme and event locations on an annual basis.



STEP 8: Consider a stepping-stone course

A [Traineeship](#), or [vocational qualification](#) such as a BTEC, can help prepare you for an apprenticeship. It's also a good idea to have a back-up plan, in case things change.

Quick links & support

Useful links

- ▶ Careers A–Z (research): [Careers A-Z list](#) | [nidirect](#)
- ▶ NI Direct Apprenticeships hub: [Apprenticeships](#) | [nidirect](#)



Scan to find out more at the NI Direct Apprenticeships Homepage

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/apprenticeships>

FE College	Training Organisation (TO)
Often larger provider	Often smaller provider
Fixed campuses	May operate across more locations
Delivers apprenticeship frameworks	Delivers the same qualifications/frameworks

Northern Ireland has six regional FE colleges including [Belfast Met](#), [NRC](#), [NWRC](#), [SERC](#), [SRC](#), [SWC](#), and a [College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise \(CAFRE\)](#).

Level 4 qualifications

HNCs

- ▶ [Higher National Certificates \(HNCs\)](#) are **vocational (work-related) higher education qualifications** which are delivered in FE colleges. To study for an HNC, you will need some previous qualifications.
- ▶ HNCs focus on **learning-by-doing** and because they are designed to equip you with **specific vocational skills** for a particular field of work, can lead straight to a career. You can also use the qualifications to progress within your current career to gain professional status.
- ▶ HNCs take around **one year to complete on a full-time basis; two years part-time**. They can allow entry into the second year of a degree (you should check specific degree entry criteria with the relevant course provider).
- ▶ For further information, visit the [Vocational Qualifications page](#) on NI Direct.

Higher Level Apprenticeships

- ▶ If you have completed a Level 3 Apprenticeship programme, A-Levels, or equivalent Level 3 qualifications, you may wish to consider a [Higher Level Apprenticeship](#)*, which combines **quality training and a recognised qualification with paid employment**.
- ▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships* are currently offered at **Level 4 – Level 7** ([Master's degree](#) level), with the majority of HLAs offered at Level 5 ([Foundation degree](#) level). The length of a Higher Level Apprenticeship will vary depending on the programme you choose, but will be a **minimum of two years**.
- ▶ Benefits of a Higher Level Apprenticeship include the opportunity to achieve a higher level qualification, **without having to pay higher education tuition fees**.
- ▶ Check out [Higher Level Apprenticeships](#)* for further information.

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● Further Education College

● University

To understand how this level of qualification fits within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#)

*Some universities may refer to Higher Level Apprenticeships at Levels 6 and 7 as "Degree Apprenticeships".

How to find a Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA)

Learn, earn and gain higher-level qualifications	
What is an HLA?	Higher Level Apprenticeships are open to people with 2 A levels or equivalent qualifications. If you're unsure how your qualifications compare, a Careers Service adviser can help.
Levels	Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) are available at Levels 4-7 and can lead to qualifications such as an HNC, Foundation Degree, Bachelor's Degree or Master's Degree, depending on the programme. The length of an HLA will vary depending on the programme you choose, but will be a minimum of two years.
Important	Some universities may refer to Level 6 and Level 7 Higher Level Apprenticeships as "Degree Apprenticeships".
Study	Available at regional Further Education (FE) colleges, College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.
Why choose an HLA?	Earn while you learn, gain experience, progress to higher qualifications.
Find out more	General information about apprenticeships in Northern Ireland Higher Level Apprenticeships nidirect See links opposite to colleges and universities.

Regional Further Education (FE) Colleges

- ▶ [Belfast Metropolitan College](#)
- ▶ [Northern Regional College](#)
- ▶ [North West Regional College](#)
- ▶ [South West College](#)
- ▶ [South Eastern Regional College](#)
- ▶ [Southern Regional College](#)

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise

- ▶ [CAFRE: College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise](#)

Universities

- ▶ [Queens University Belfast](#)
- ▶ [Ulster University](#)

Example HLA Areas

- ▶ Engineering
- ▶ ICT and Software Development
- ▶ Business and Management
- ▶ Construction and Built Environment
- ▶ Hospitality and Tourism

Level 5 qualifications

HNDs

- [Higher National Diplomas \(HNDs\)](#) are **vocational (work-related) higher education qualifications** which are delivered in FE colleges. To study for a HND, you will need some previous qualifications. Most HND courses require 1 A-Level or equivalent qualification (please check specific requirements with course provider).
- HNDs focus on **learning-by-doing** and because they are designed to equip you with specific vocational skills for a particular field of work, can lead straight to a career. You can also use the qualifications to progress within your current career to gain professional status.
- HNDs take around two years to complete on a full-time basis, and can also be taken part-time, which takes longer. HNDs can **allow entry into the second, or third year of a degree** – if the course modules align with those of the second-year course (you should check specific degree entry criteria with the relevant course provider).

Foundation degrees*

- [Foundation degrees](#) are higher education qualifications which **blend academic with work-based learning**, offering a clear route to university or into employment. They are mainly taught in FE colleges. If you have a Foundation degree, you may be able to **top up to a degree** at your place of study, or enter a degree course elsewhere at the start of the second, third or final year. Entry requirements for a Foundation degree will depend on the course and the college. They will normally be A-Levels or vocational equivalents such as BTEC National Diplomas.
- You can find out more about Foundation Degrees at: [The Open University](#), [Queen's University Belfast](#) and [Ulster University](#)

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

 School  Training Provider  Further Education College  University

* Foundation Degrees are mainly offered through FE colleges, and are often delivered in partnership with, and validated by, universities.

Technical and Professional Qualifications

- FE colleges offer qualifications, at both Level 4 and 5, in a range of subjects aligned to technical or academic routes that provide pathways to an occupation or to further studies. They cover a **wide range of vocational areas**, including accounting, business, sport, hair and beauty, motor vehicle, construction and engineering.
- These qualifications are offered through **a number of awarding organisations** including Accounting Technicians Ireland, City & Guilds, Chartered Institute of Marketing, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Cambridge OCR, Open College Network Northern Ireland, Pearson, Northern Council for Further Education and Vocational Training Charitable Trust.
- Check out FE college websites for more information and the courses available.
- For further information, visit the [Vocational Qualifications page](#) on NI Direct.

Higher Level Apprenticeships

- If you have completed a Level 3 Apprenticeship programme, A-Levels or equivalent Level 3 qualifications, you may wish to consider a [Higher Level Apprenticeship](#), which combines **quality training** and a **recognised higher level qualification with paid employment**.
- Higher Level Apprenticeships are currently offered at Level 4 (equivalent to [HNC](#) level), Level 5 (equivalent to [HND/Foundation degree](#) level), Level 6 ([degree level](#)) and Level 7 ([Master's degree](#) level), with the majority of HLAs offered at Level 5 ([Foundation degree](#) level).
- Check out [Higher Level Apprenticeships](#) for further information.

Level 6 qualifications



Degrees



- ▶ [Degrees](#) are higher education qualifications that help you to develop a thorough understanding of a subject. To study for a [Bachelor's degree](#), leading to a qualification such as Bachelor of Science (BSc), you will need to have the qualifications to meet the entry criteria for your chosen course. Bachelor's degrees can be offered on a **full-time and/or part-time basis**. Contact the relevant course provider to find out more about the entry requirements and whether it is offered on a full-time or part-time basis.
- ▶ The FE colleges also provide some degree level courses. More information can be found on the college websites.
- ▶ You can use your degree to progress into employment, and/or to get a place on a [postgraduate course](#), such as a diploma or Master's degree.

Higher Level Apprenticeships/Degree Apprenticeships



- ▶ If you have completed a Level 3 Apprenticeship Programme, A-Levels or equivalent Level 3 qualifications, you may wish to consider a [Higher Level Apprenticeship](#)*, which combines **quality training** and a **recognised higher education qualification with paid employment**.
- ▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships are currently offered at Level 4 – Level 7 ([Master's degree](#) level).
- ▶ Check out [Higher Level Apprenticeships](#) for further information.

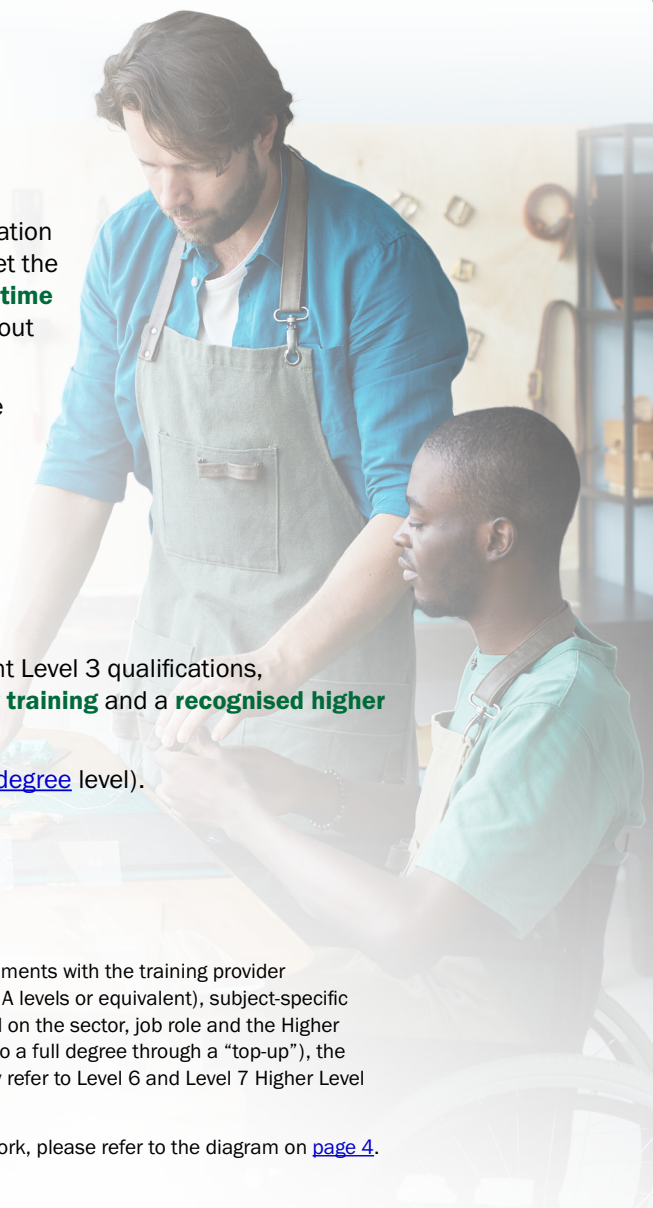
The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● Further Education College

● University

* If you are considering a Higher Level Apprenticeship, you should always check the specific entry requirements with the training provider delivering the programme. These vary by framework and may include relevant qualifications (for example A levels or equivalent), subject-specific requirements, and academic entry criteria set by the awarding institution. Entry requirements will depend on the sector, job role and the Higher Level Apprenticeship level. If you're planning to progress (for example, moving from a foundation degree to a full degree through a "top-up"), the college or university will explain what you need to move on to the next level. Please note, universities may refer to Level 6 and Level 7 Higher Level Apprenticeships as Degree Apprenticeships.

To understand how the qualifications/programmes on this page fit within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).



Level 7 and Level 8 qualifications*

Postgraduate ●

- ▶ If you want to continue your studies after a [Bachelor's degree](#), or learn more about a particular subject, there are a range of **postgraduate qualifications** available.
- ▶ Some are linked to a **specific profession**, while others allow you to complete an **original piece of research**.
- ▶ There are four main types of postgraduate qualifications:
 - [postgraduate certificates](#)
 - [master's degrees](#)
 - [postgraduate diplomas](#)
 - [doctorates](#)
- ▶ Most types of postgraduate qualifications will include **taught and research elements**. Normally, to study for a postgraduate qualification, you will need to have a [Bachelor's degree](#) at 2:2 level or above. To find out the entrance requirements for a particular postgraduate course, visit the [UCAS](#) website or visit [The Open University](#), [Queen's University Belfast](#) or [Ulster University](#).

Higher Level Apprenticeships/Degree Apprenticeships ● ●

- ▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships/Degree Apprenticeships are currently offered at Level 4 – Level 7 ([Master's degree](#) level). Check out [Higher Level Apprenticeships](#) for further information.

The colour-coded dots represent where each qualification or course can usually be studied:

● Further Education College ● University

To understand how the qualifications/programmes on this page fit within the wider qualifications framework, please refer to the diagram on [page 4](#).

*Level 8 qualifications are typically offered by universities. Some FE colleges may offer Level 7 qualifications.



Applying for a higher education course

[Higher education](#) qualifications include:

Undergraduate – Diplomas; Foundation degrees; Bachelor's degrees

Postgraduate – Master's degrees; PhDs or doctorates; Postgraduate diplomas; postgraduate certificates; postgraduate conversion courses

How to apply for a higher education course

- ▶ You can search and apply for most higher education courses online.
- ▶ You usually have to be 18 or older to take a higher education course. They're usually taught in universities, FE colleges, and specialist institutions, like art schools or agricultural colleges.
- ▶ How and when you apply for higher education depends on where you wish to study and what type of course you're applying for.

Whichever route you choose, it's worth starting your preparations early!



Applying for a full-time undergraduate course at university

Institutions based in Northern Ireland

Apply via [UCAS](#)

[Queen's University Belfast \(QUB\)](#)

[Ulster University](#)

[Stranmillis University College](#)

Apply direct to the institution

[St Mary's University college](#)
(apply directly to the university college)

[The Open University](#) (apply directly via the website)

Higher Education courses at FE colleges in Northern Ireland

You can check with the individual [further education colleges](#) to see what higher education courses are on offer, and how to apply for them.

Institutions based in the Republic of Ireland

Institution	Application method	Link to institution website
Universities based in the Republic of Ireland	Majority use the Central Applications Office (CAO) ; however there may be exceptions for some – further information is available on College application and entrance requirements – citizensinformation.ie	Further information on studying in the Republic of Ireland is available on Third-level education – citizensinformation.ie

Institutions based in Great Britain

Institution	Application method
Universities based in Great Britain For further information on universities in Great Britain please visit the relevant website: England – officeforstudents.org.uk Wales – studyinwales.ac.uk Scotland – gov.scot	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
University of Oxford	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) plus additional “The Oxford Application” direct through website
University of Cambridge	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) plus additional “My Cambridge Application” direct through website

Specialist UK-based institutions

Institution	Application method
Specialist music, dance and drama	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) Conservatoires

Timing of applications

- ▶ [UCAS](#) and [CAO](#) will each have set timeframes/deadlines for each part of the application process, and key dates will vary year to year.
- ▶ **It is important that you familiarise yourself with the key stages and timings of the relevant applications process** - UCAS publishes a valuable [toolkit for student applicants](#); CAO also publishes a very useful [application guide/handbook](#).

Applying for a part-time undergraduate course at university

- ▶ To apply for a part-time undergraduate course, you must apply directly to the university or college.
- ▶ Use the relevant university website to search for available part-time courses. You should check with the university directly if you have any questions about entry requirements.
- ▶ For Republic of Ireland based providers, you can search via [Education in Ireland](#).



Applying for a postgraduate higher education course

- ▶ Each institution has its own application procedure, so you'll need to pay attention to deadlines, as they may be different for each course.
- ▶ You can search and apply for postgraduate courses online.
- ▶ Like undergraduate courses, most postgraduate courses can be taken on a full-time or a part-time basis.

Finding a postgraduate course

- ▶ University and college postgraduate prospectuses list research opportunities and taught courses.
- ▶ You should contact the relevant university if you have any questions about course availability or entry requirements.
- ▶ For postgraduate study in the Republic of Ireland, universities set their own criteria for admission and you apply directly to the institution. Please check the relevant institution website for further details on the application process.

Applying for financial help

Once you've made your application, you can apply for financial help through Student Finance. The websites below have further information:

- ▶ [Student finance – nidirect.gov.uk](https://nidirect.gov.uk)
- ▶ [Student Finance NI](#)
- ▶ [Student Universal Support Ireland](#)

More useful links

- ▶ [Discover Uni](#)
- ▶ [Universities and colleges in Northern Ireland](#)
- ▶ [Universities and colleges in the Republic of Ireland](#)
- ▶ [Get facts and figures on universities, colleges and courses](#)
- ▶ [Prospects](#)
- ▶ [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(UK\)](#)
- ▶ [Quality and Qualifications Ireland](#)
- ▶ [Qualifax.ie](#)



Training, skills and employment support programmes

Helping you into work

There are a range of initiatives and programmes structured to assist those who may face additional challenges in regard to employment, such as those with disabilities/health conditions; carers; returners to the workplace; lone parents, etc.

Some of the support available includes:

► **Disabilities/Health Conditions**

NI Direct has information on [schemes available for those with disabilities or health conditions](#).

► **Unemployed**

For those who are currently unemployed and looking for experience in the workplace, the [Work Experience Programme](#) can help develop **employability skills**.

The [Skills for Life and Work Programme](#) is aimed at young people who require experience of work and **Entry Level/Level 1 qualifications**.

► **Midlife MOT – Your Work**

Find out about **flexible working options** and **learn new skills** to suit your changing needs with [Midlife MOT – Your Work](#).

You can find more information on NI Direct on [Helping you into work](#).

There are various charitable and other organisations locally which aim to **support those with disabilities, into education, training and employment**. These include [Disability Action](#), [Supported Employment Solutions \(SES\)](#) and [Ulster Supported Employment Ltd \(USEL\)](#).

► **Widening Participation**

All Higher Education providers are committed to **increasing the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds** into and through their Higher Education journey.

For more information on what is available, check out the **Widening Participation/finance pages** on the websites of the local FE colleges and universities.

Other training and skills programmes

DfE Assured Skills Academies

[DfE Assured Skills Academies](#) offer pre-employment training to equip individuals with the skills needed to compete for new employment opportunities.

- ▶ DfE works with **new and expanding companies** that have current job vacancies available, and offers pre-employment training to meet the skills needed for those jobs. Individuals that successfully complete an Assured Skills Academy training programme are guaranteed a **job interview** with the recruiting company.
- ▶ A **weekly training allowance** is paid to participants while on the programme, and weekly travel expenses are reimbursed. Participants may also be eligible for assistance with childcare costs. To find out more, please see [DfE Assured Skills Academies](#).

- ▶ People who have previously taken part in academies have secured full-time jobs in different areas such as:

- IT
- Professional Services
- Financial Services
- Manufacturing and Engineering
- Childcare

- ▶ Please note that **entry requirements** for Assured Skills Academies may vary.

Those interested in being kept up-to-date with upcoming opportunities may register their interest with DfE's Employer Skills Branch by email: assuredskills@economy-ni.gov.uk

LOCAL COUNCILS

Employability, skills and training programmes

Local councils offer various employability, skills and training programmes, such as the [Employment Academies](#) offered by Belfast City Council and other council areas. Employment academies are short, intensive programmes which provide tailored training to help people get jobs and help businesses with recruitment.

Academies have been delivered in sectors including business services, construction, fibre-splicing, leisure, playwork and childcare, social care, technology and transport and logistics.

As availability of employability, skills and training programmes may vary depending on council area, please **contact your local council** or visit the relevant **council website** for further details on what is available near you.

[Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council](#)

[Ards and North Down Borough Council](#)

[Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council](#)

[Belfast City Council](#)

[Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council](#)

[Derry City and Strabane District Council](#)

[Fermanagh and Omagh District Council](#)

[Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council](#)

[Mid and East Antrim Borough Council](#)

[Mid Ulster District Council](#)

[Newry, Mourne and Down District Council](#)

Useful websites

Universities

- ▶ [The Open University](#)
- ▶ [Queen's University Belfast](#)
- ▶ [Stranmillis University College](#)
- ▶ [St. Mary's University College Belfast](#)
- ▶ [Ulster University](#)

Further Education Colleges

- ▶ [Belfast Metropolitan College](#)
- ▶ [North West Regional College](#)
- ▶ [Northern Regional College](#)
- ▶ [South Eastern Regional College](#)
- ▶ [Southern Regional College](#)
- ▶ [South West College](#)

College courses related to agri-food and land-based sectors

- ▶ [College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise \(CAFRE\)](#)

Other useful links

- ▶ [Careers Service](#) – See Careers A-Z for profiles on careers
- ▶ [Careers Service – guides to help with career planning](#) – includes A Parental Guide; A Young Person's Guide and An Adult's Guide
- ▶ [JobApplyNI](#) – search for job/apprenticeship opportunities
- ▶ NI Direct – [Vocational Qualifications](#)
[Search for apprenticeship opportunities](#)
[Routes into Higher Education](#)
[Financial help for adult learners](#)
[Education Maintenance Allowance \(EMA\) explained](#)
- ▶ [Prospects](#) – graduate careers information and advice.
- ▶ [UCAS \(Universities and Colleges Admissions Service\)](#) - explore applying to universities in the UK; also contains information on alternative options and career planning.
- ▶ [Discover Uni](#) website – compare HE courses across the UK on a range of measures including results from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Graduate Outcomes (GO); also includes some information on funding available for HE students.
- ▶ [CAO \(Central Applications Office\)](#) – explore applying for undergraduate courses in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the ROI.

Contact the Careers Service

The Department for the Economy's Careers Service provides **free, professional** and **impartial** careers advice and guidance to help you make informed choices about your future career. If you would like to discuss your options, please contact the [Careers Service](#)

The COIU team welcomes your feedback on the content of this document to help inform future publications. If you have any comments, please email the mailbox - COIU@economy-ni.gov.uk

Please note: This guide is designed to help you explore your options and support further careers research. The information is correct at the time of publication, but courses, programmes, qualifications and entry requirements can change over time.

For the most up-to-date information, please contact the school, college, training provider or organisation directly.

The guide includes links to external websites for further information, however, the Department is not responsible for the content of these sites.