

CAREER ENTRY ROUTES AT A GLANCE

A YOUNG PERSON'S QUICK GUIDE



A quick visual guide to learning, training and work options in Northern Ireland

The Big Picture

- Career entry routes are the different ways you can **move into learning, training, employment or self-employment**
- Qualifications in Northern Ireland are grouped into levels, from Entry Level to Level 8, **representing different stages of learning**.
- There is **no single right route**. Different pathways can lead to the same destination, and many people move between learning, training and work as they build skills and experience.

For example, a young person interested in becoming a software engineer could progress after GCSEs to a Level 3 IT/ Computing qualification at an FE college, then move into a Higher Level Apprenticeship - including a degree apprenticeship where available - combining paid work in the software sector with study towards a higher-level qualification.

- Career decisions are not one-time choices** - you can change direction as you go, and every skill you gain can help you take the next step.

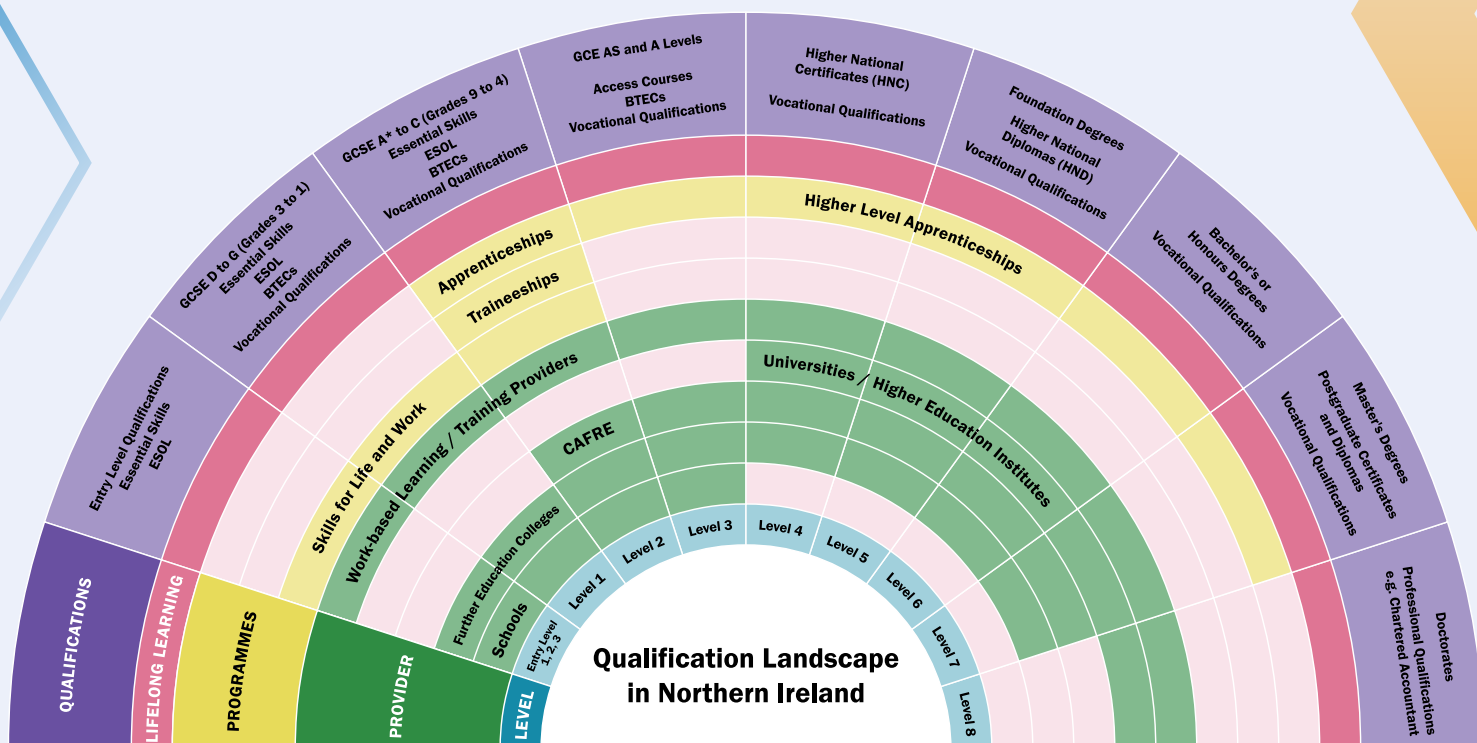
Course level	What this level is	Typical entry requirements*	What it can lead to
Entry Level ●●● e.g. Skills for Life and Work (Entry Level/Level 1 programme)	Introductory learning to build confidence and basic skills.	No formal qualifications required; designed for young people building towards Level 1.	Progression to further education; Traineeships; Apprenticeships or employment.
Level 1 ●●● e.g. Essential Skills Level 1; GCSEs (grades D–G / 3–1)	First step qualifications focusing on basic knowledge and skills.	Some prior learning or basic skills; requirements vary.	Level 2 qualifications, traineeships or entry-level jobs.
Level 2 ●●● e.g. GCSEs (grades A*–C/9–4) Level 2 NVQ or BTEC , Traineeships	Intermediate learning, including GCSEs and vocational courses.	Qualifications, skills, experience or prior learning that show you are ready for Level 2.	Level 3 study, apprenticeships or employment.
Level 3 ●●● e.g. Level 3 Extended Diploma, A levels ; Access to Higher Education Diploma	Advanced post-16 learning, including academic and technical routes.	GCSEs or Level 2 qualifications (requirements vary by course).	Higher education, higher level apprenticeships/degree apprenticeships, or skilled employment.
Level 4–5 ● e.g. HNC (Level 4); HND Level 5; Higher Level Apprenticeship ; Foundation Degree (Level 5)	Higher and technical education, often with a practical focus.	Level 3 qualifications or relevant work experience.	Higher-skilled roles, further education, progression to Level 6, such as degree study, or Level 6 Higher Level Apprenticeships.
Level 6 ●● e.g. Degree , Level 6 Higher Level Apprenticeship	Degree-level study or equivalent learning.	Level 3 or Level 4–5 qualifications, depending on the route.	Professional employment, postgraduate study or Level 7 Higher Level Apprenticeship
Level 7–8 ●● e.g. Master's Degree (Level 7); Higher Level Apprenticeship (Level 7); Doctorate (Level 8)	Postgraduate and advanced professional study.	A relevant degree or equivalent experience.	Advanced specialist or leadership roles.

Colour-coded dots show where qualifications at each level can usually be studied:

● School ● Further Education College ● Training Provider ● University

Please note: Courses and entry requirements may vary, please check with provider.

Skills for Life and Work is delivered by FE colleges and training organisations. Traineeships are delivered through FE colleges. Access to HE Diplomas are delivered in FE colleges. Foundation Degrees are mainly offered through FE colleges, often in partnership with universities. Universities may refer to Level 6 and 7 Higher Level Apprenticeships as Degree Apprenticeships. Level 8 qualifications are usually offered by universities. Some FE colleges may offer Level 7 qualifications.



Which routes might suit me?



Do I prefer hands-on or classroom-based learning?



Do I know what career I'm interested in?



Do I want to earn while I learn?



Do I want to keep my options open?

What The Routes Mean For You



Qualifications Delivered in Schools

- ▶ Mainly classroom-based learning
- ▶ Includes GCSEs, A levels, and vocational and applied qualifications
- ▶ Can keep open a wide range of options including FE, HE, apprenticeships at different levels and employment.



Vocational and Technical Study

- ▶ Practical, job-focused courses
- ▶ Often studied in FE colleges or through training providers
- ▶ Builds skills valued by employers



Apprenticeships

- ▶ Paid job with training
- ▶ Earn while you learn
- ▶ Available from Levels 2-7 (including Higher Level Apprenticeships at Levels 4-7)



Training and Skills Programmes

- ▶ Develop confidence and employability
- ▶ May include work experience
- ▶ Can lead to work or further study



Higher Education

- ▶ Study at university or FE college
- ▶ Usually entered after Level 3
- ▶ Includes foundation degrees and degrees



Employment

- ▶ Some routes lead straight into work
- ▶ Skills can be built on the job
- ▶ Learning can continue throughout your career

Want to find out more?

This factsheet is based on the Careers Service Careers Occupational Information Unit Bulletin – [A Guide to Career Entry Routes](#).



The [DfE Careers Service](#) provides free, professional and impartial careers advice to help you explore your options and plan next steps.