

CAREER ENTRY AND PROGRESSION ROUTES A QUICK GUIDE FOR ADULTS



A practical overview of learning, training and work options in Northern Ireland

Choosing a Route That Works For You



Further Education (FE)

- ▶ Practical or academic courses, often flexible or part-time
- ▶ Suitable for retraining or upskilling
- ▶ Delivered by FE colleges across Northern Ireland



Higher Education (HE)

- ▶ University, or HE options available in local FE colleges
- ▶ Includes foundation degrees and degrees
- ▶ Full-time and part-time options are available



Apprenticeships

- ▶ Paid employment combined with training
- ▶ Earn while you learn
- ▶ Available at Levels 2 - 3



Higher Level Apprenticeships

- ▶ Paid employment combined with training
- ▶ Earn while you learn
- ▶ Available at Levels 4 - 7
- ▶ Level 6 Higher Level Apprenticeships may be referred to as Degree Apprenticeships by universities



Training and Skills Programmes

- ▶ Short courses or sector-specific training
- ▶ Programmes available through [DfE](#) and [Labour Market Partnerships](#) can support skills development and career progression or change.



Work-based Progression

- ▶ Developing skills within your current job
- ▶ Learning can continue throughout your working life and support career progression or change

Your Options As An Adult

- ▶ There is no single route into learning or employment/self-employment as an adult.
- ▶ Previous experience may be recognised, helping you access learning at the right level.
- ▶ Many people move between work, learning and training over time and may develop their careers by **building on existing skills**, retraining, upskilling or returning to learning later in life.
- ▶ The skills you already have—such as, **teamwork, communication, problem-solving or time management**—can be a real advantage and are highly valued by employers.
- ▶ This guide highlights the main options and how they can fit around work and personal commitments.

Planning your next step

- ✓ What skills and experience do I already have?
- ✓ Do I need a qualification, or experience only?
- ✓ Can I study part-time or while working?
- ✓ Would a paid route (such as an apprenticeship) suit me best?
- ✓ What options are available locally?

Want to find out more?

This factsheet is based on the Careers Service Careers Occupational Information 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.



Career entry & progression routes for adults (Northern Ireland)

For more information on qualification levels, please see: [Qualifications: what the different levels mean](#)

Level	Examples (typical adult routes)	What you usually need to get started*	Where it can lead
Entry Level ● ● Building confidence, refreshing basic skills or preparing to return to learning.	▶ Entry level awards ▶ Essential Skills	No formal qualifications required; designed for those building towards Level 1.	Level 1 learning or supported employment
Level 1 ● ● ● Developing basic knowledge or practical skills for work or further study.	▶ Level 1 certificates ▶ GCSEs (grades D–G / 3–1) ▶ Essential Skills	Basic skills, prior learning or experience (varies by course).	Level 2 courses, traineeships, entry-level jobs
Level 2 ● ● ● Gaining recognised qualifications, including GCSEs and vocational courses.	▶ GCSEs or Level 2 vocational courses ▶ Traineeships ▶ Apprenticeships	Qualifications, skills, experience or prior learning that show you are ready for Level 2.	Level 3 study, apprenticeships or work
Level 3 ● ● ● Preparing for skilled roles, career change or progression.	▶ A levels or Level 3 vocational courses ▶ Apprenticeships ▶ Access to HE	GCSEs, Level 2 qualifications, or relevant skills/work experience.	Higher education, Higher Level Apprenticeships or skilled jobs
Level 4 ● Technical or professional qualifications, often linked to specific sectors.	▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships ▶ HNC ▶ CertHE	Level 3 qualifications or significant experience.	Level 5 or advanced technical roles, Level 5 Higher Level Apprenticeships
Level 5 ● Higher technical and professional qualifications, often linked to specific sectors.	▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships ▶ Foundation degrees**** ▶ Professional diplomas	Level 3 or Level 4 qualifications, or significant experience.	Level 6 or higher skilled roles, Level 6 Higher Level Apprenticeships/Degree Apprenticeships
Level 6 ● ● ● Degree-level or equivalent professional learning.	▶ Bachelor's degree ▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships	Level 3 or Level 4–5 qualifications, depending on the route.	Postgraduate study or professional roles, Level 7 Higher Level Apprenticeships/Degree Apprenticeships
Level 7–8 ● ● ● Advanced or specialist study and professional development.	▶ Higher Level Apprenticeships (Level 7) ▶ Master's degrees (Level 7) ▶ Doctorates (Level 8)	A relevant degree or equivalent experience.	Senior, specialist or leadership roles

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

● Further Education College

● Training Provider

● University

Course availability and delivery arrangements may vary. Please contact colleges, training providers and universities directly for more information.

***Please note: Entry requirements may vary, please check with provider.**

Traineeships are delivered through local Further Education (FE) colleges. Access to Higher Education (HE) Diplomas are delivered in FE colleges; some include Level 2 qualifications (such as GCSE Maths and English) alongside Level 3 study. 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.

