



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 taking your first steps towards a career? Maybe you are looking for a new direction or would like to progress further in your current career? Or perhaps you are supporting someone such as a family member, a pupil, or a colleague.

The [Careers Service](#) has produced this Career Entry Routes guide to offer an overview of entry routes available and the progression between different levels of qualification, from **Entry Level through to Level 8**. Depending on your area of interest, there are opportunities available within traditional **classroom-based education**, such as A Levels; **vocationally related qualifications/vocational education and training**, such as apprenticeships; as well as via **training programmes**, such as those funded by DfE and local councils, for example.

The [Careers Service Careers Occupational Information Unit \(COIU\)](#) provides up-to-date careers information about different sectors of the Northern Ireland economy. These resources explore the career options on offer and include industry insights and career profiles from those working/studying locally.

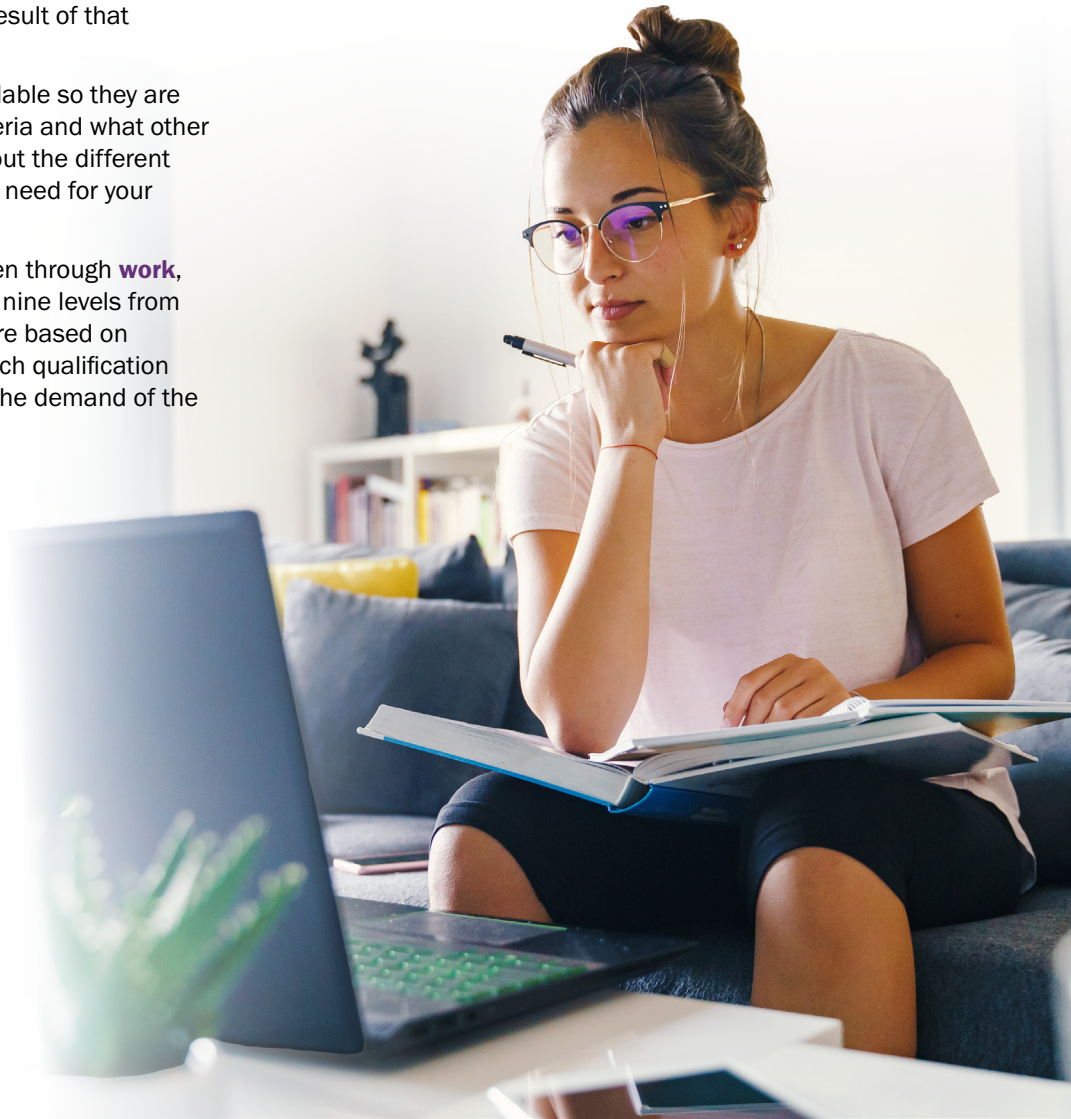
This Careers Entry Routes guide is designed to be used alongside [COIU careers resources](#), to guide those seeking to build a career in their chosen sector.

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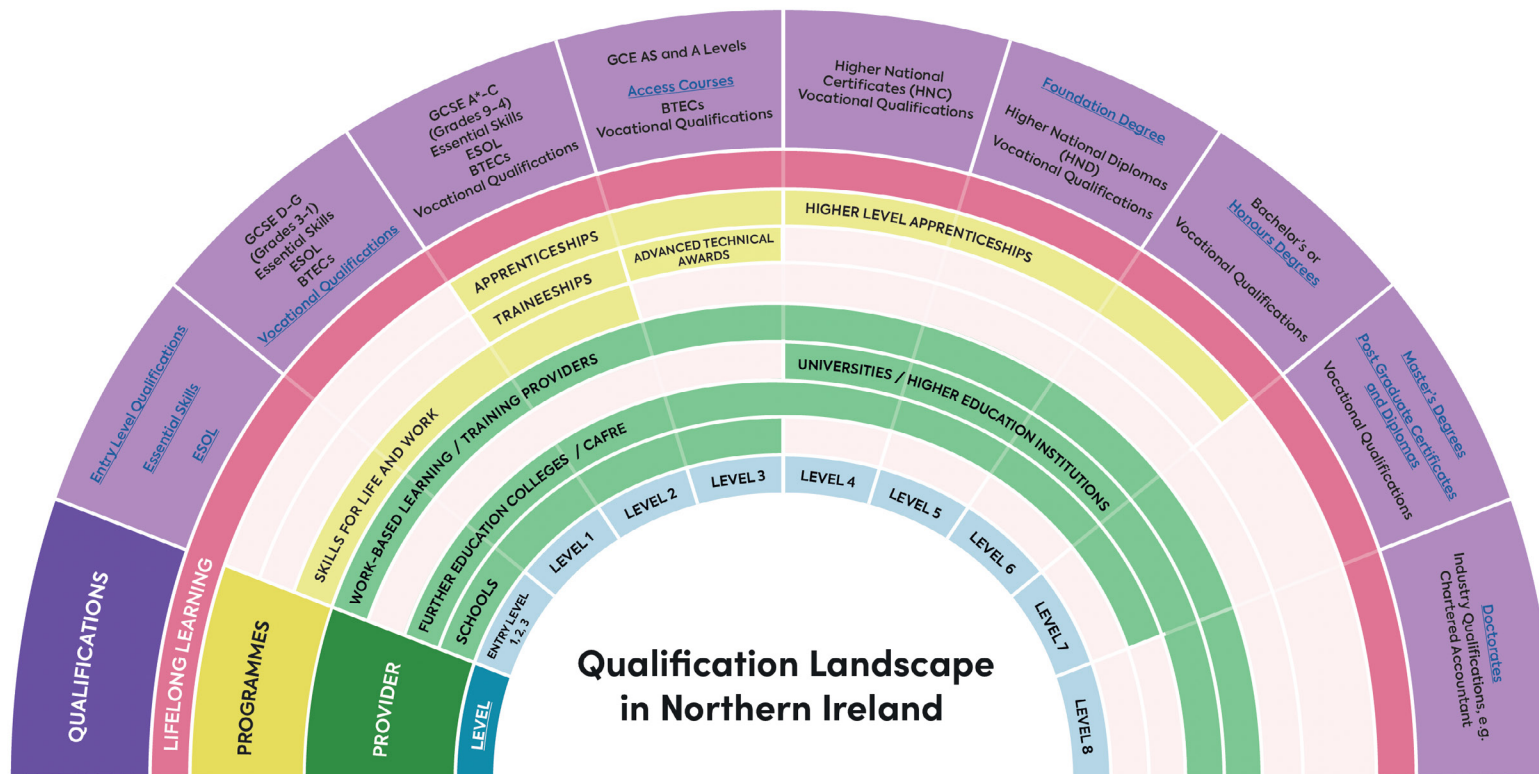
## Qualification Levels

- ▶ 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.



## Qualification 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 settings** 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](#); [Skills for Life](#); [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 a [job](#).

### 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 24 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 is strongly focused on achievement and helping people progress after the programme. This could include aiming for a [Traineeship](#) or an [Apprenticeship](#), or other employment.
- ▶ Find out more about [Skills for Life and Work](#)

## 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**.
- ▶ This level of qualification is most often achieved in Years 11 and 12 at post primary schools, so they are best for students aged 15-16; alternatively, they're also great for those who want to further their education.
- ▶ 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](#); [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 **O level - grades A-C**.

## 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 successfully complete the traineeship, you will receive a full **Traineeship diploma** plus other qualifications **equivalent to up to five GCSEs at grades A\* to C** (including English and Mathematics qualifications at level 2).
- ▶ NI [Traineeships](#) will typically take **one to two years** to complete on a full-time basis.
- ▶ You can find more information about NI Traineeships and how to apply on the [NI Direct Traineeships page](#)

## 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 off-the-job training and gain a recognised qualification, while building technical and employability skills, as well as essential skills.
- ▶ Apprenticeships are offered from **Level 2**, up to **Level 7**. For more information on Level 2 Apprenticeships, 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 be in a job or have found an employer who is willing to take you on** as an apprentice in the occupational area relevant to your chosen apprenticeship.
- ▶ 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](#)

## Level 3 qualifications

### Further Education

### Level 3 Further Education Courses

- ▶ **Level 3 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](#). The Advanced Technical Award is a programme at development stage which is based on a Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma with the addition of work experience and project-based learning and is available in a small range of subject areas.
- ▶ However, 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 course pathways 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 pathways, 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 info.

### 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 FE college**
- ▶ They are also available to study **part-time**
- ▶ 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 course to complete an A Level qualification
- ▶ Alternatively, you can take all the AS and A2 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

### Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are offered from **Level 2, up to Level 7**. For more information on Level 3 Apprenticeships, please see [Level 3 Apprenticeship Frameworks](#)



## 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-levels or equivalent 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 professional-level qualification, **without having to pay higher education tuition fees**.
- ▶ Check out [Higher Level Apprenticeships](#) for further information.

## 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.

## 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, Oxford Cambridge and RSA, 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-levels or equivalent 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 (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 move into employment, and/or to get a place on a [postgraduate course](#), such as a diploma or Master's degree.

### Higher Level Apprenticeships

- ▶ If you have completed A-levels or equivalent 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).
- ▶ Check out [Higher Level Apprenticeships](#) for further information.



## 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](#)
  - [postgraduate diplomas](#)
  - [master's degrees](#)
  - [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.

### Higher Level Apprenticeships

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



## 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:

▶ **Step Up**

The recently launched, individualised programme [Step Up](#) is available within local **Further and Higher Education establishments**. It provides opportunities for 16-24 year olds to **re-engage with skills and learning, and to provide access to employment**.

▶ **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 Solution \(SES\)](#) 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 each FE Colleges and universities websites.

## 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 will be offered a **job interview** with the recruiting company.
- ▶ A **weekly training allowance** of £160 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:
  - cyber security
  - data analytics
  - digital skills
  - financial services
  - legal services
  - software development
  - software engineering
  - welding
- ▶ 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](mailto:assuredskills@economy-ni.gov.uk)

### SKILL UP – The flexible skills programme

If you're aged 18 and over and eligible to work in Northern Ireland, a range of free, accredited short courses are available to help you re-train and re-skill, through **SKILL UP – the flexible skills programme**. All courses are delivered by the local further and higher education providers.

- ▶ Opportunities are available from **entry to postgraduate levels**, focusing on skills identified by industry, linked to **priority economic sectors**. Fully funded places are available until the end of March 2024.
- ▶ Courses will be delivered online primarily, and will provide an opportunity to **re-skill** and **upskill** into areas identified as being economic growth sectors in Northern Ireland.

Please visit the **Skill Up** webpage to find out what courses are available from local colleges and universities. For more information on specific courses, visit the provider's website.

## 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](#)
- ▶ [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
- ▶ [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](#) – Explore degree programmes and careers



## 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](#)

You may also wish to use the careers tools available on the [NI Direct Careers page](#) to help you research your career options.

*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](mailto:COIU@economy-ni.gov.uk)*

*Please note, the information within this publication is intended to facilitate further careers research. Please contact course/training providers directly for more information. The Department is not responsible for the content of external websites.*

*The information contained within this publication is correct at the time of publication; however, it may be subject to change at any time.*

