Official guidelines on traineeships and apprenticeships


As there is currently no traineeship programme in Northern Ireland (although the Youth Training strategy is set to introduce one; see the 'Current debates and reforms [3]' article for further information), the remainder of this article only covers apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships are work-based training programmes, designed around the needs of employers and supported by government funding. They involve a combination of on- and off-the-job training. Apprentices work alongside experienced staff to gain job-specific skills and receive training. An Apprenticeship is not a qualification in itself, but a framework that contains separately certified elements, including an appropriate work-based qualification such as a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at either Level 2 or Level 3 (equivalent to level 3 or 4 on the European Qualifications Framework [4], EQF), functional skills qualifications and a relevant knowledge based
qualification, often referred to as a technical certificate. Awarding organisations may offer combined qualifications which include the competence and knowledge-based elements.

16- to-25-year-olds can choose from around 100 apprenticeships, including computer science, motor vehicle maintenance, mechanical engineering and retail. For some there are minimum entry requirements, such as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE, the single subject qualification taken at age 16 at the end of a two-year programme of study in key stage 4, age 16). The choice for those over 25 is limited to a much smaller number of sectors considered to have priority importance to the wider economy.

Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland are currently available at Level 2, Level 3 and Higher Level. Details of the Apprenticeship Frameworks are published on the nidirect website. It is possible to progress from Level 2 to Level 3 or go straight in at Level 3, depending on apprentice ability and the qualifications they already hold. It usually takes up to two years to complete one level and up to four years to finish the two levels, depending on the complexity of the qualification and the apprentice's ability.

Apprenticeship Frameworks follow a standard format which includes:

- vocational qualifications
- ‘Essential Skills’ which must include communication, application of number and ICT where appropriate
- a technical certificate
- other mandatory or optional elements as specified by the particular industry for the occupational area.

Key elements of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland are:

- permanent remunerative employment (a minimum of 21 contracted hours per week with one employer, including day release/off-the-job training) for the apprentice
- payment to the apprentice of a wage commensurate with the industry rate for that job
- an Apprenticeship Framework (see above) for the specific occupational area agreed with the sector
- an agreed Personal Training Plan (PTP)
- a funding structure which supports training costs, makes payments on achievement of periodic milestones and on achievement of outcomes
• support and commitment of the relevant representative organisations and employers.

Apprentices aged 16-18 are entitled to the apprentice minimum wage of £4.35 an hour. Apprentices are paid for both their normal working hours and the time they spend training as part of their apprenticeship. Apprentices aged 19 and over are also entitled to the £3.90 apprentice minimum wage in the first 12 months of their apprenticeship. After the first 12 months of their apprenticeship, people aged 19 and over are entitled to the National Minimum Wage. See the article on 'Labour market situation in Northern Ireland' [6] for details of the National Minimum Wage.

Promoting traineeships and apprenticeships

Each of the national initiatives and programmes referred to above (under Traineeships and Apprenticeships) organises special events and activities to promote learning in entrepreneurship and to celebrate young people’s achievements in this area. Opportunities are promoted to young people through all the usual channels, including social media, television and print advertisements.

Invest NI [7], the official online channel for business advice and guidance in Northern Ireland, provides information [8] for employers who may be interested in taking on an apprentice.

There are also a number of national events, including the Apprenticeship Awards and National Apprenticeship Week, which promote and celebrate apprenticeships.

Recognition of learning outcomes

The minimum standards for apprenticeships and traineeships are covered in the sub-section covering official guidelines on traineeships and apprenticeships [9].

Funding

The Department for the Economy [10] funds the full costs of the off-the-job training included in the ApprenticeshipsNI framework for the duration of the apprenticeship for those aged 25 and under. For those aged 25 and over, the Department’s contribution is 50 per cent.

Traineeship and apprenticeship reform

The 2014/15 budget allocation for ApprenticeshipsNI was £18.8 million. Securing our Success, the Northern Ireland strategy on Apprenticeships [2] (2014) states that the Department for the Economy [10] will seek to maintain this level of funding for the new programme.

The Department for the Economy proposes to allocate 40 per cent of its expected European Social Fund allocation for 2014-2020 (approximately €82 million) to apprenticeships and youth training. Total funding of apprenticeship and youth training is projected to be in the region of €205 million for the period, with the Department providing the remaining 60 per cent of funding.

The Department will develop a new financial model to underpin future apprenticeship provision. This will include engagement with HMRC around consideration of UK-wide tax incentives or other forms of financial support that may enable employers to be more proactive in terms of the purchasing of training.

Apprenticeship Levy
Following the passing of the Finance Act 2016 [11], a new Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in April 2017 for large employers (including public bodies) who have an annual pay bill of more than £3 million. The levy is set at a rate of 0.5% of an employer’s gross wage bill. Each employer will receive a £15,000 allowance, meaning that only those whose total wage bills are more than £3 million pay the levy. Employers only pay the portion of the wage bill that is above the £3 million threshold.

Guidance related to how hiring an apprentice and apprenticeship funding for employers is available from the government website [12].

More information about how the levy will operate in Northern Ireland is available from the Department for the Economy’s guide for employers [13].

Quality assurance

The Education and Training Inspectorate [14] (ETI), part of the Department of Education [15], is responsible for inspecting work-based training.

Inspection generally takes place over five days although this depends on the size and complexity of the organisation being inspected. A work-based learning inspection focuses on:

- the quality and effectiveness of leadership and management of the curriculum provision;
- the effectiveness of the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes;
- the achievements and standards of the trainees and apprentices; and
- the quality of the provision for training and learning.

Further information is available from the ETI website. [16]