



Chambers
Ireland
Advancing business together

Action Plan on Apprenticeship 2026 – 2030

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About Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our members are affiliated Chambers in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities. Skills and workforce development are key priorities for our network as part of this remit, as they play a vital role in enhancing productivity and strengthening our national competitiveness. We therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on the future roadmap for the Irish apprenticeship system.

Introduction

Ireland currently has one of the most educated workforces in the world when it comes to third level qualifications, however, our apprenticeship rates have been much more modest. Apprenticeships provide a proven, high-quality learning pathway that combines education and employment to deliver tangible benefits for learners, employers and the wider economy. We support the national commitment to strengthening the apprenticeship system and commend the growth within the sector over recent years. A 63% increase in the apprentice population between 2019 and 2024 is significant and the growth in the number of apprenticeship programmes is indicative of the success of the Apprenticeship Action Plan. The establishment of the National Apprenticeship Office has also been an important commitment to strengthening governance and strategic growth in the sector. There is no time to waste in creating and deploying an updated Plan that builds upon this momentum.

One of the key opportunities of the apprenticeship system is that it has the potential to build a skilled and adaptable workforce that can meet some of the most urgent and pressing skills needs facing our economy. The national emphasis on our infrastructure deficit over recent years and the calls to mobilise the apprenticeship system to meet these skills needs is of vital importance. The updated National Development Plan defines a clear trajectory for our economic development with €275 billion of public capital investment to 2035 dedicated to unlocking housing, upgrading water and energy infrastructure, delivering more roads and providing better public transport. This will only be possible with a sufficiently skilled pipeline of talent. A modern, industry-led apprenticeship system is therefore not just an education priority but a strategic imperative for meeting Ireland's infrastructure ambitions.

Similarly, the changing world of work and the pace of the twin transition has made skills forecasting and anticipating future jobs needs more volatile and unpredictable. Rapid digitalisation and the transition to a low-carbon economy demands a far more agile and responsive skills system. Apprenticeships are uniquely positioned to meet this need by blending on-the-job learning with formal education to ensure apprentices develop both technical competencies and real-world problem-solving capabilities.

Key Points

- Apprenticeships are vital for meeting Ireland's future skills needs, particularly in infrastructure, digitalisation, and the green transition.
- Forecasting future labour-market demand is essential, especially for large national projects like Metrolink, which requires specialised skills and early planning.
- Employer engagement must guide new apprenticeship programmes, ensuring they reflect real skills gaps, regional needs and operational requirements. SMEs' voices need stronger inclusion.
- Businesses and industry need more information on the potential opportunities of the apprenticeship system. This includes greater awareness on the scope of programmes now on offer and the potential opportunity to develop an apprenticeship through the consortia model.
- Apprenticeships should be promoted as first-choice pathways, not only for school leavers but also for workers seeking reskilling opportunities.
- Financial supports are key to boosting participation, including grants for learners and incentives for employers such as expanding the One More Job initiative.
- The system is too slow to respond to emerging technologies and embedding micro-credentials could enable faster adaptation to evolving skills needs.
- Quality assurance should focus on collaboration between employers, learners, providers and the National Apprenticeship Office.

Consultation Questions

1. What criteria should guide decisions to create new apprenticeship or traineeship programmes?

Employer engagement and industry demand should be a driving force in the decision-making process when establishing new apprenticeship or traineeship programmes. High-quality, extensive consultation will often indicate skills gaps or employment issues before a trend is discernible from hard data. The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) is our national labour-market intelligence unit that collects and analyses skills needs. It tracks demand and supply indicators, however, demand-side tracking needs more integrated intelligence direct from employers too. This is important in validating and contextualising labour market data, which can help distinguish between recruitment difficulties that are caused by specific conditions, as opposed to genuine skills gaps. It can also highlight regional variation and indicate the scale or volume of placement opportunities, which are essential in determining the viability of a new programme. While the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs includes employer representation and is an important research arm in assessing skills needs in Ireland, we would like to see much broader consultation with employers as a driving force in the development of new programmes. While the rise of the consortia-led model of apprenticeships has resulted in the creation of 19 new programmes since the launch of the Action Plan in 2021, we need to ensure all employer voices are being heard, including SMEs. Employers play a crucial role in the apprenticeship system by offering placements, paying salaries and investing in the personal and professional development of each apprentice, therefore, meeting their needs and securing their buy-in is essential. Additionally, employers must be assured of the quality and relevance of the course and curriculum, as these should address their operational requirements or align with their organisational practices.

Forecasted labour market demand based on national policy priorities should be another key consideration in the criteria to establish new apprenticeships or

traineeships. This incorporates the need to meet skills shortages that will arise in future. As technological change accelerates, areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, data analytics, advanced manufacturing and green technologies are reshaping job roles faster than traditional education pathways can adapt. We need a forward-facing and flexible Apprenticeship Action Plan that can look ahead and build skills capacity based on key national objectives and emerging trends or priorities. One such example is the need over coming years for workers with the appropriate technical skills to develop the Metrolink, a project-first in the history of the state. Looking at the experience in London of developing Crossrail, there was an early commitment as part of the project planning to integrate apprenticeships as part of the programme delivery and, in the end, over 1,000 apprenticeship starts were associated with the project. It also established a dedicated Tunnelling and Underground Construction Academy (TUCA) that provided over 4,400 job starts for local/unemployed people and trained over 16,000. TUCA has since been used to provide knowledge and expertise across the globe for similar projects. Therefore, targeted skills forecasting has the potential to unlock productivity and improve our competitiveness if we get this right.

2. How can apprenticeships and work-integrated-learning options be promoted as first-choice education and training pathways?

Promoting apprenticeships as a first-choice education and training pathway requires engaging young people early in their school journey. Many still hold outdated perceptions of apprenticeships, often viewing them as limited to traditional trades, so it is essential to communicate that modern apprenticeships span a wide range of sectors and offer qualifications up to degree level and beyond.

Highlighting the “earn while you learn” model is particularly important, as it provides a compelling alternative to full-time academic study, especially at a time when youth unemployment is rising. In December 2020 and in the height of the Covid pandemic, the youth unemployment rate (under 25s) reached a peak of 44.8%. Apprenticeships

under the 2021 Action Plan were therefore pitched as a “route to rapid re-employment for those impacted by scarring effects and structural changes to the economy and labour market”¹ and, by all accounts, this strategy was incredibly successful. In recent months, we have started seeing the emergence of a worrying trend of rising youth unemployment once again. In January, this rate was 11.8% and has been rising over recent months. The acceleration of AI has been attributed as the cause by some commentators, so there is now more reason than ever before to promote and champion apprenticeships as a post-secondary education pathway that enables young people to start earning while working towards a recognised qualification in a field that is in high-demand. By presenting apprenticeships as a credible, attractive and future-focused option, we can help young people make informed decisions about their career paths and ensure they are aware of the opportunities available to them.

However, it is important that apprenticeships are also pitched as a first-choice education and training pathway for workers looking to reskill and change careers. One in ten people starting an apprenticeship are now aged over 31, so it is not sufficient to target young school leavers only, which may have been the traditional model. With the changing world of work, people will be increasingly likely, and may be required, to change their career trajectories over the course of their lives to keep up with the pace of change. Apprenticeships are adaptable and flexible models that mean you can continue to earn while learning new skills that will lead to a new career. We need to encourage such models if we want a responsive workforce that can meet current and emerging skills needs. In reaching this more mature cohort of workers, we must ensure that apprenticeship signposting highlights the opportunities that are available.

For employers, there is still a considerable knowledge gap relating to the range of programmes that are now offered as part of the apprenticeship system and the accessibility of this system to employers of all sizes. Just as potential learners often

¹ <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/action-plan-for-apprenticeship-2021-2025.pdf>

lack awareness of the full range of available programmes, many employers are similarly unaware. In businesses that are experiencing skills gaps and challenges recruiting qualified workers, apprenticeships could be used to meet this demand and build capacity, however, in many cases this is not even a consideration, let alone a first-choice pathway. In 2024, over 32,000 employment permits were issued, a 24% increase on the previous year and the highest ever number of permits issued by the state. While this is a crucial conduit linking Irish businesses to international talent, this may indicate that there are more opportunities for the apprenticeship system to alleviate some of the ongoing pressure from skills shortages.

There is also greater scope to communicate to industry the pathways that are available to develop a new apprenticeship programme through the consortia model. While it is positive that 19 new programmes were established in recent years, we should be ensuring there is much greater uptake over the lifespan of the next Action Plan. This could include reforming the process of creating a new programme to reduce administrative complexity and fragmentation in the system, streamlining the approvals process and creating greater incentives for industry to get involved and create a new programme. Increased engagement with businesses and industry partners could ensure greater participation and accelerated growth of the apprenticeship system.

3. and 4. What supports or incentives would encourage learners and employers to engage and stay engaged?

Additional financial supports for both learners and employers would encourage greater engagement. For learners, this might include further grants or bursaries that could assist in travel, resourcing and accommodation. For employers, this could include more funding for the One More Job initiative.

The pay scales for programmes are designed to reflect the balance between employer and learner. For many employers, taking on an apprentice is a major undertaking with correlating costs and risks. Employers must invest significant time and resources into training, supervision and administration and, in the early stages, an apprentice will

require close guidance and support. As both technical and soft skills develop and productivity improves, it is proportionate that pay rates increase and this is reflected in the current system. The non-progression rates in the first year of apprenticeships are indicated as being between 8% and 10%², which is relatively low when compared with higher education retention rates. The incentive for the learner is the opportunity to earn a wage from the moment they start an apprenticeship that will continue to grow year on year during their studies and which leads to a well-paid and recognised profession. Employers that invest in apprenticeships are consciously investing in the personal and professional development of each apprentice, as well as building the resilience and capability of their workforce. Retaining fully-qualified apprentices that have been trained in-house is a strategic priority for businesses and, in many cases, remuneration at this stage will reflect this.

However, smaller firms are less likely to retain apprentices after they qualify (35%) in comparison to larger firms with more than 50 employees (63%). These employers may require greater supports and advice on how to smoothly transition a worker from apprentice to qualified member of staff, particularly given the competitiveness of the labour market. Retaining a worker that knows your internal processes and organisational structure is incredibly valuable to a business, so they need support to define attractive progression pathways. This could include support with incorporating the mentoring model beyond qualification, formal company onboarding, as well as constructive and supportive performance reviews.

5. What targeted measures would improve participation among under-represented groups?

As above, increased financial supports would be a welcome measure that would take some pressure off employers, as costs associated with completing an apprenticeship can be a barrier to participation. Such costs include travel and accommodation. One

² <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-03-27/52/>

of the benefits of apprenticeships is the regional employment opportunities they create, and this is a key priority for our network of affiliated Chambers right across the country. However, transport to and from their placement or off-the-job training can be a significant barrier. Similarly, housing shortages across the country are driving apprentices further from potential opportunities. Therefore, it would be positive to see supports put in place to mitigate against these problems and to encourage greater regional participation.

The gender bursary that was introduced in January 2022 was a positive initiative that has been welcomed by employers. Similar measures would be very welcome to encourage greater diversity and inclusion across the programme of different apprenticeships.

6. What mechanisms would make apprenticeships more adaptable to emerging skills and occupations, and technological and workplace changes?

While the consortia model should, in theory, make apprenticeships more responsive to emerging trends, the process for creating new apprenticeships or adapting current programmes is taking too long to respond to market needs. Micro-credentials or bite-sized learning offers flexible, accessible and cost-effective ways to attain skills, but it also offers opportunities within apprenticeships for programme developers to quickly and effectively implement key edits as required. We have seen that emerging technologies and, in particular, the rise of AI demands skills over degrees, with a significant decline in university education requirements for AI roles. One of the issues with the apprenticeship system in its current form is that it is too slow and takes too long to respond to market needs and technological change. Embedding micro-credentials into the system would allow bite-sized skills modules to be updated quickly in response to emerging innovations without disrupting an entire programme.

7. What specific actions will best strengthen quality assurance across apprenticeships and work-integrated-learning options?

Consultation and open dialogue between employers, learners, training providers and the NAO. The establishment of the National Apprenticeship Office in 2022 represented a huge step forward in terms of oversight and quality assurance. Continuing to invest in the capabilities and remit of the NAO will be important in ensuring consistent long-term quality assurance.

Many employers, particularly SMEs, can underestimate that apprenticeships involve far more than technical, on-the-job training. For younger apprentices in particular, a major part of their learning and development is gaining the soft skills needed to succeed and thrive in the workplace. Such skills are not necessarily taught as part of a curriculum but can include effective communication, teamwork, work ethic, time management, problem solving etc. SMEs don't necessarily have the knowledge or capacity to formally educate or integrate these skills fully in the on-the-job learning, so they may need more support on this front. While this is a focus of some programmes, there could be greater capacity-building integrated as part of the classroom component and additional supports could be put in place to assist both learner and employer to navigate these challenges.

8. How can the apprenticeship system maintain its national character while expanding to meet diverse regional and sectoral needs?

The apprenticeship system's national character has undergone significant transformation over recent years and, as a result, is less defined than it once was. Unlike the German apprenticeship system which is rooted in a long and extensive history of medieval guild structures and deeply embedded craft traditions, Ireland has an opportunity to redefine this national character and create a cutting-edge adaptable system that works for the modern labour market. The rollout of consortia-led apprenticeships over a decade ago have accelerated progress in the sector, however, this has not translated to a new identifiable 'national character' and there is still more

that can be done to translate these developments to the general public, potential future apprentices and interested employers.

9. Where should additional investment be focused to deliver the greatest impact?

As mentioned above, focusing on National Development Plan project delivery should be a strategic priority for future development and additional investment in the apprenticeship sector.

Chambers Ireland have been consistently calling for more urgency in the delivery of NDP infrastructure projects that are fundamental drivers of our competitiveness. While planning and approvals are initial stumbling blocks that require immediate attention, we should also be ensuring that we have a forecasted pipeline of qualified talent to meet the needs of these specialised projects before it is too late and skills gaps become another contributing factor to delayed development.

10. Are there innovative ideas or international best practices Ireland should adopt?

France has formally introduced micro-credentials within apprenticeship programmes. These are short, skill-specific certifications that recognise partial achievements or targeted competencies. As mentioned above, this creates opportunities to quickly and effectively adapt apprenticeship systems to rapid technological or workplace changes, particularly at a time of accelerated digitalisation and the rise of AI. Although the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) system has incorporated micro-qualifications, they sit alongside apprenticeships rather than being structurally embedded within them. Special purpose awards, minor awards, and supplemental awards function similarly to micro-credentials, however, they are not embedded in apprenticeship pathways. They are also not used as formal building blocks toward apprenticeship qualifications.

Countries such as Denmark and Germany have unified apprenticeship systems that are considered to be some of the most effective in the European Union. In these

systems, employers and unions are involved directly in the governance and design of apprenticeships through formal trade committees. These committees make decisions on curriculum, duration and remuneration, which ensures relevance and shared ownership. These committees play a statutory role under law, not just an advisory one. In Ireland, while the NAO oversees a unified system and manages programme development and quality assurance, it is administrative and is not an employer-union decision-making body. The core benefit of the statutory trade-committee model is speed and authority in updating training content to match technological and workplace changes. Furthermore, this share in responsibility leads to higher employer buy-in. One of the reasons German and Danish employers invest so heavily is that they have direct authority in shaping the system. While this model may not work directly in Ireland due to fundamental jurisdictional differences, the structured employer engagement is a key component that could be extremely beneficial in the growth and development of the Irish apprenticeship system.