

# PULSE

work+

## The voice of apprentices across NI

Insights and Recommendations  
for Employers, Learning  
Providers and Policymakers

**MAY 2025**

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# 1.0 Executive Summary

This report is a first-of-its-kind analysis of the the perceptions of apprentices in NI. It highlights successes and identifies areas for improvement based on survey data and feedback from 188 apprentices.

As its heart this report shows that **apprenticeships are an outstanding success** for the NI economy and society.

Apprenticeships continue to serve as vital pathways for career development, offering tangible benefits in skill-building, salary progression, and employment prospects. However, barriers such as limited opportunities, inconsistent employer responsiveness, and gaps between academic learning and workplace needs restrict their accessibility and impact.

Key findings reveal strong salary growth among apprentices, a widespread preference for flexible and hybrid working arrangements, and the critical role of mentoring and structured support systems. The report offers targeted recommendations for employers, learning providers, and policymakers to enhance the apprenticeship experience.

For **employers**, recommendations include creating more apprenticeships, enhancing retention strategies, investing in training and development, strengthening employer-apprentice relationships, collaborating with learning providers, promoting apprenticeship opportunities, offering flexible and hybrid working arrangements, and improving application responsiveness.

For **learning providers**, recommendations focus on aligning curricula with industry needs, improving support systems, leveraging technology, facilitating employer-apprentice feedback loops, reducing group work requirements, and strengthening outreach initiatives.

For **policymakers**, the report recommends increasing funding and incentives, streamlining regulations, promoting apprenticeships as prestigious career pathways, and supporting centralised information systems.

Implementing these recommendations will strengthen the apprenticeship ecosystem in NI, ensuring it remains a dynamic and effective vehicle for skill development, social mobility, and economic growth.

## 2.0 About

### Workplus

Workplus helps employers grow their own future talent through its skills marketplace. It supports employers as they work together to better connect with schools, collaborate on work experience, employability programmes & apprenticeship recruitment, and deliver social value.

Workplus supports employers across multiple sectors, from fast-growing SMEs to large multi-nationals to enhance their employer brand.

A key element of this work is dedicated to transforming the apprenticeship culture in Northern Ireland, including:

- Helping employers integrate apprenticeships into their organisations
- Offering a one-stop-shop for employers, showcasing all available apprenticeship courses
- Conducting marketing campaigns to find aspiring apprentices
- Streamlining the application process for both employers and applicants through our platform, making it easier for them to find each other.
- Supporting the social community of apprentices, the NI Apprenticeship Society.

### NIE Networks

NIE Networks supports a robust apprenticeship culture, recognising apprentices as a key part of its workforce development. It invests in training, mentorship, and practical experience to nurture the next generation of engineers, technicians, and innovators in Northern Ireland.





## 3.0 Introduction

### Overview of the NI Apprenticeship System

Currently, there are around **13,000 apprentices** in NI, with c. 6,000 new apprentices starting each year.

### What is an apprenticeship?

Apprenticeships are **jobs** that include formal learning components, offering a unique blend of practical work experience and academic study. Open to **people of all ages**, these programmes typically last between 2 to 8 years. While some apprenticeships require no prior qualifications, others, such as degree apprenticeships, may need A-Levels or BTECs.

The educational aspect is provided by various institutions including Further Education colleges, CAFRE, Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast, and private training providers. With over **150** different types available, apprenticeships cover a wide range of fields including **software development, cyber security, civil engineering, fintech, manufacturing, administration, marketing, and law**.

Apprenticeships play a crucial role in the overall skills landscape and inclusive growth of Northern Ireland. They offer immediate employment with the added benefits of learning, experience, and nationally recognised qualifications, with opportunities to progress up to Masters degree level.

Beyond their economic benefits, apprenticeships promote greater **social inclusion** by providing a pathway for people of all ages, especially those with no or low academic qualifications, to **fulfill their potential**. This approach not only helps individuals but also contributes to creating a more inclusive workforce across various sectors.

### NI Apprenticeship Policy

The policy context for apprenticeships in Northern Ireland has been evolving in recent years. The **2014** apprenticeship strategy, "Securing our Success", set out a vision for an **employer-led apprenticeship system**. Key focus areas were to increase employer engagement, streamlining the application process, and aligning apprenticeships with the skills needs of priority economic sectors.

More recently, in September 2024, the Minister for the Economy committed to publishing a **3-year Apprenticeship Action Plan** as part of the Economic Vision for Northern Ireland. This plan is expected to build on previous strategies and address current challenges in the apprenticeship system. The upcoming Action Plan is **anticipated to provide clearer direction** on how Northern Ireland will develop and expand its apprenticeship offerings to meet the evolving demands of the economy and workforce.

## 4.0 Key Findings

### 4.1 About the Apprentices

The survey was circulated to learning providers, employers and individual apprentices across NI. From the c.13,000 apprentices we received 188 responses from 30 different subject areas and roles across technology, construction, engineering, and finance.

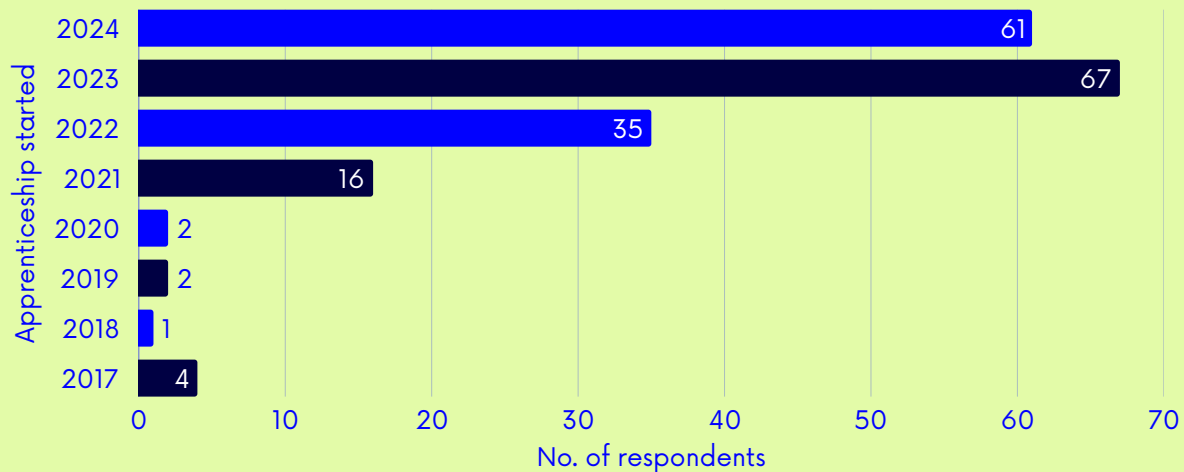
The survey was open from 1 October - 12 November 2024.



# 188

apprentices responded

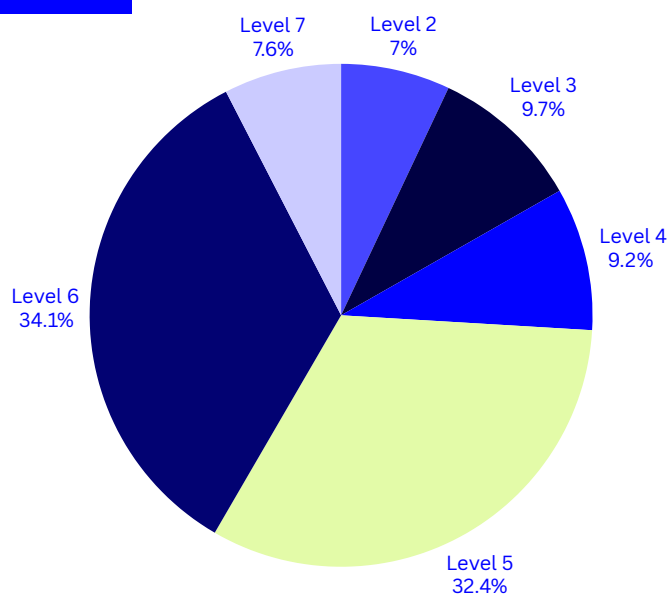
#### When did they start?

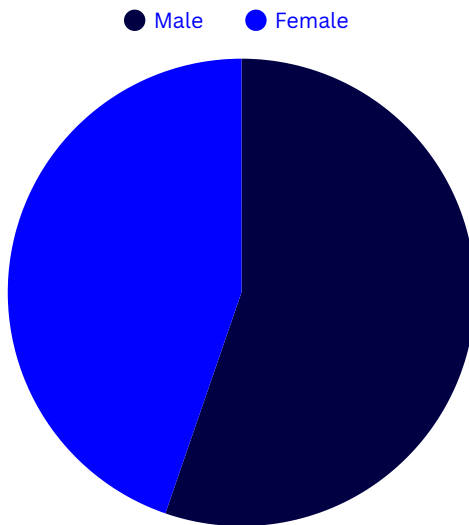
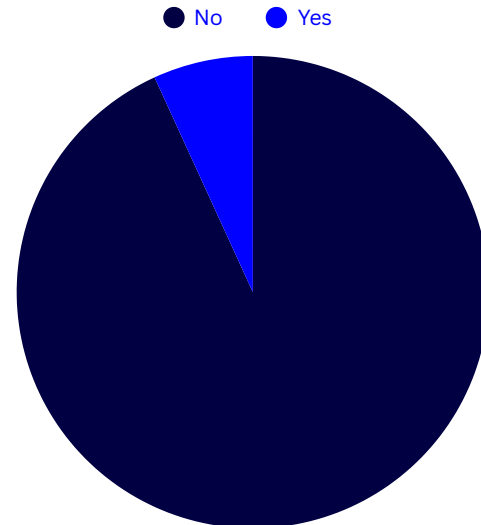


## Which subject?



## Which level?



**Sex****Disability**

## 4.2 Finding an Apprenticeship

Finding suitable apprenticeships remains challenging.

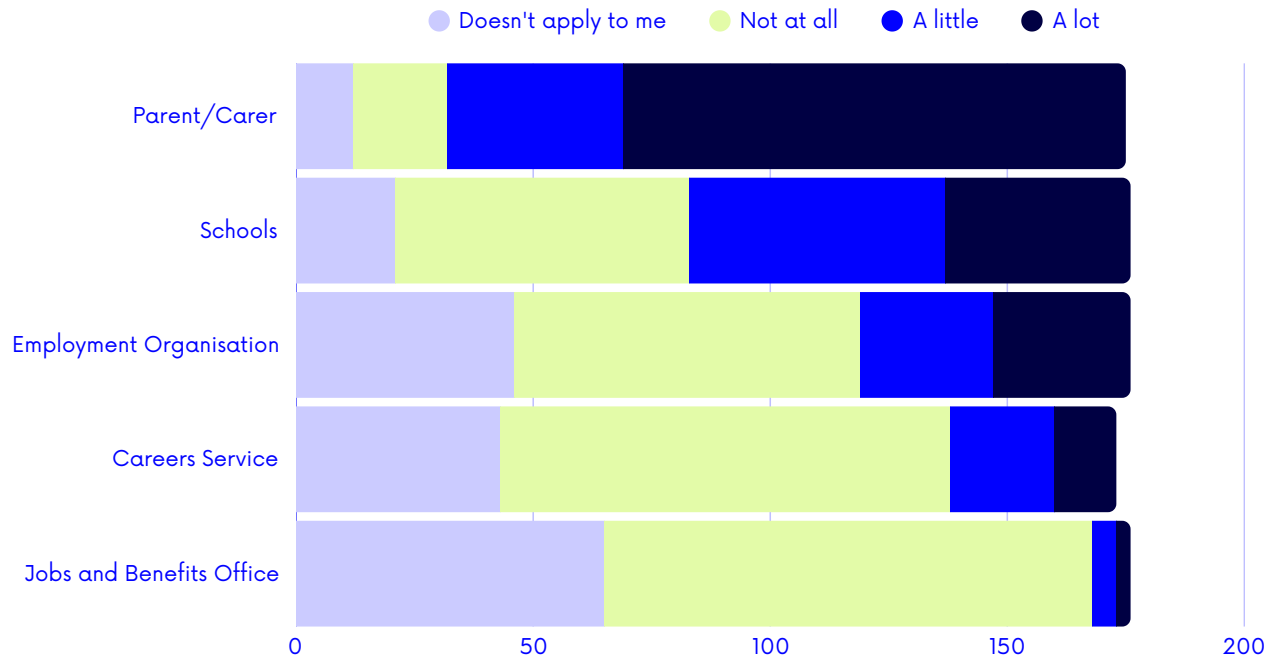
Limited opportunities and a lack of centralised information create significant barriers. "I applied to over 20 roles and only received three responses," shared one apprentice, highlighting the intense competition.

Timing also poses difficulties. "The process overlapped with exams, making it incredibly stressful," remarked another apprentice. These challenges underscore the need for streamlined application processes and better employer engagement.

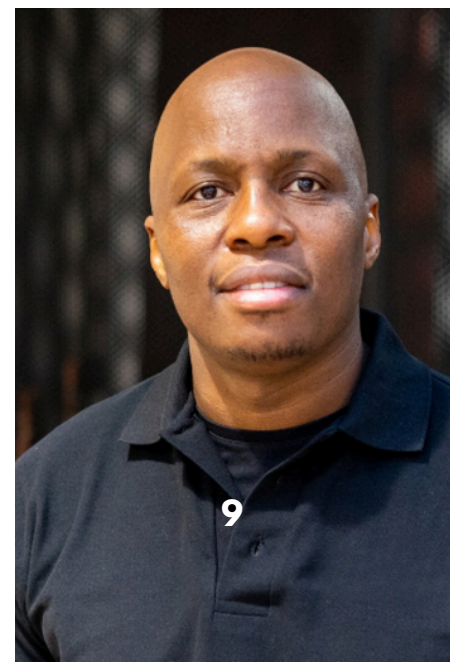
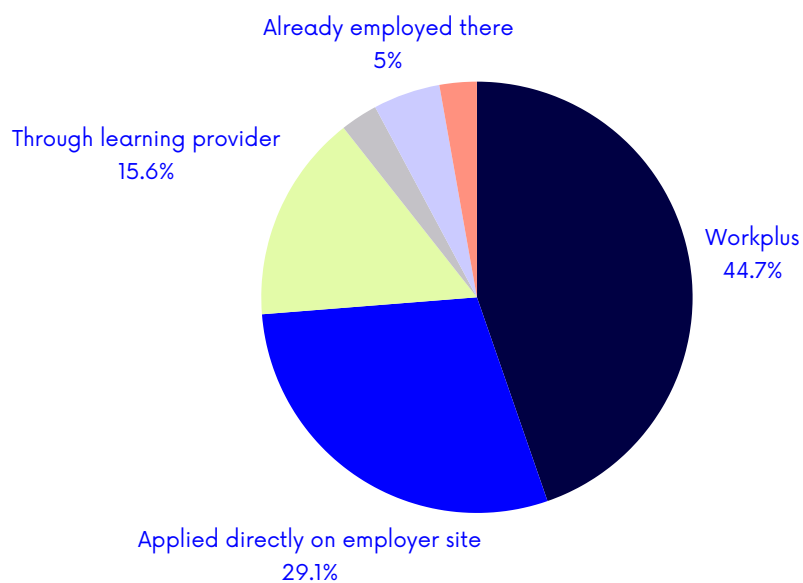
Support from parents and carers remains the most significant influence as aspiring apprentices make their applications.

Finding an employer for an apprenticeship posed several challenges for many individuals. A significant issue was the limited availability of opportunities, as apprentices often reported "a lack of companies offering apprenticeships" and "limited employers wanting to start apprentices". This shortage created intense competition, with one individual remarking, "There was a lot of competition. I think in my company there were 480 applicants, with only 8 people being given offers."

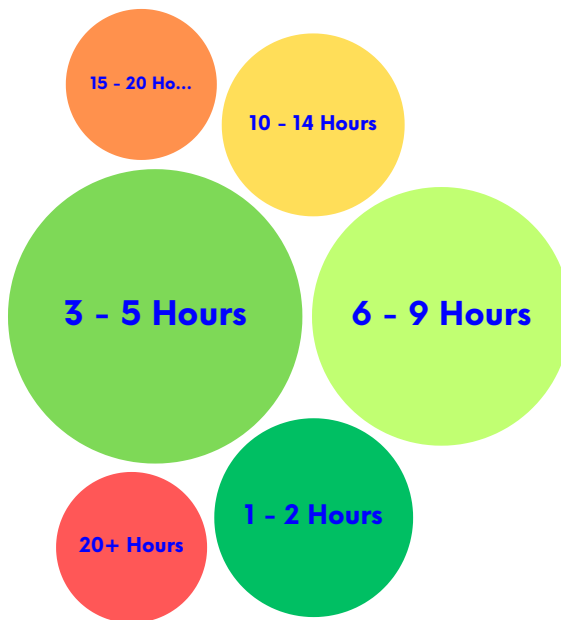
## During your application were you supported by?



## How did you find your employer?



## How many hours overall did you spend applying to apprenticeship opportunities?



Apprentices mostly spent 3–9 hours applying for opportunities, with some investing over 20 hours.

This highlights the demanding nature of the process. Streamlined application systems and improved employer responsiveness are needed to reduce this burden.

The lack of clear information further complicated the process. Many apprentices expressed frustration about the absence of guidance, stating it was difficult to "know whether an employer is willing to support an apprenticeship-based position." Others highlighted that "companies weren't advertising opportunities," which required them to conduct extensive research or contact employers directly. One apprentice shared, "It wasn't advertised that much," while another explained, "There was no list of employers available, so finding opportunities required thorough research."

Poor responsiveness from employers was another recurring issue. Several individuals described how their applications went unanswered, with one noting, "There was a lack of opportunity available. When I did apply, very often there was no response at all."

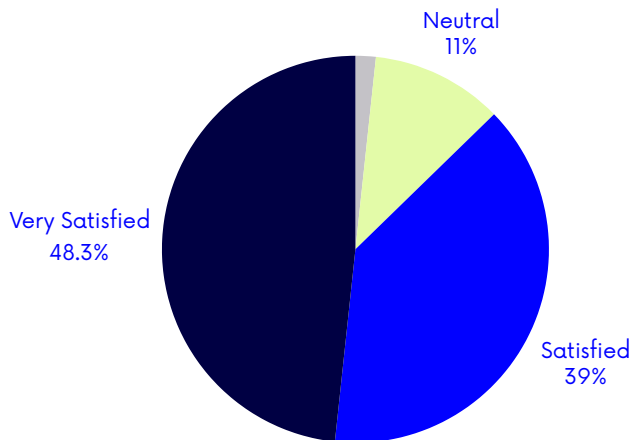
Some apprentices received responses too late to act, as one explained, "I wasn't aware I was able to take my HLA until later on in the year, which meant that when I started to look for an employer, a lot of them had already taken as many apprentices as they could."

Balancing the demands of the application process with academic commitments was also a challenge. Apprentices highlighted the difficulty of managing "a technical interview and balancing schoolwork with applications," particularly during peak revision periods. One individual explained, "The application process was long and ran in peak revision period, meaning I had to take time away from study to prepare and attend interviews."



## 4.3 Perspectives on Employment

### How satisfied are you with your employer?



### Salary

Apprenticeships offer a clear pathway to career development, combining practical experience with incremental financial rewards. They present an attractive option for individuals looking to **"earn while they learn"** and for employers seeking to develop a skilled and loyal workforce.

On average, apprentices begin with a starting salary of **£19,126.49**. This reflects the entry-level nature of most apprenticeship roles, balancing affordability for employers with a competitive incentive for apprentices.

The survey indicated that an overwhelming **94%** expressed confidence in their career prospects, supported by an average salary increase of **£7,500 during their apprenticeship**. According to respondents, apprentices in Northern Ireland earn an average of **£28,526 beyond three years - which is ahead of the national average**.

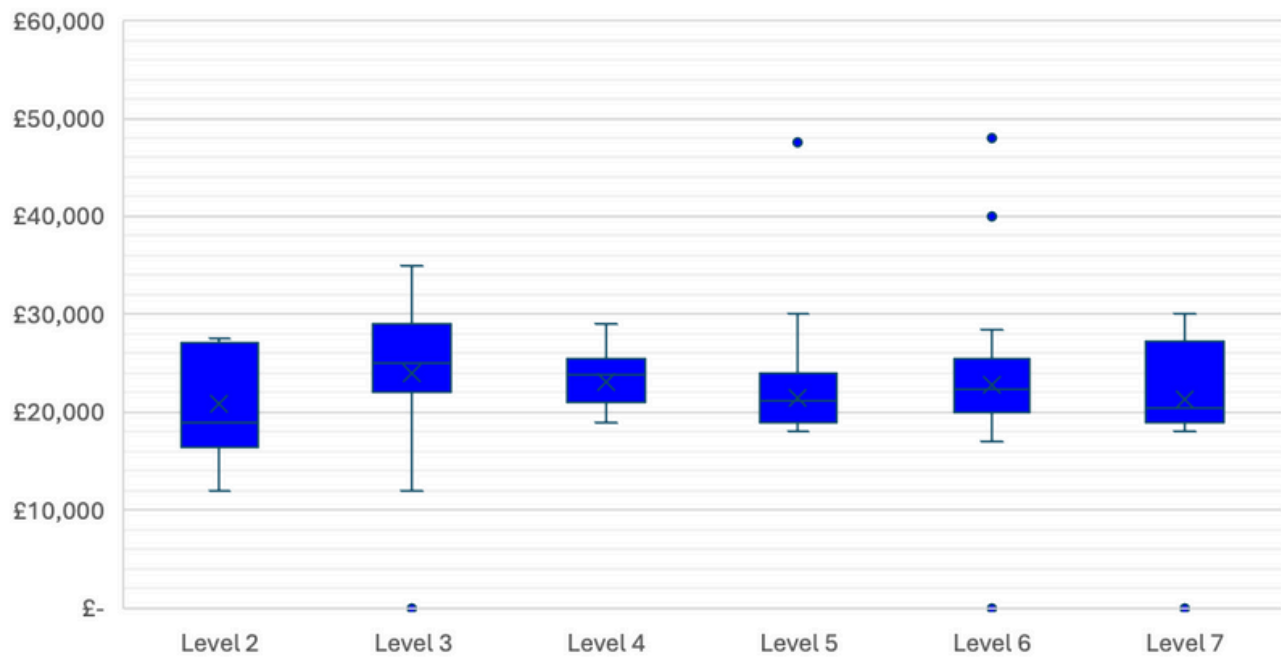
### Factors Influencing Salary Growth

**Years Since Starting:** Longer durations lead to higher salary increases as apprentices progress through training and take on advanced roles.

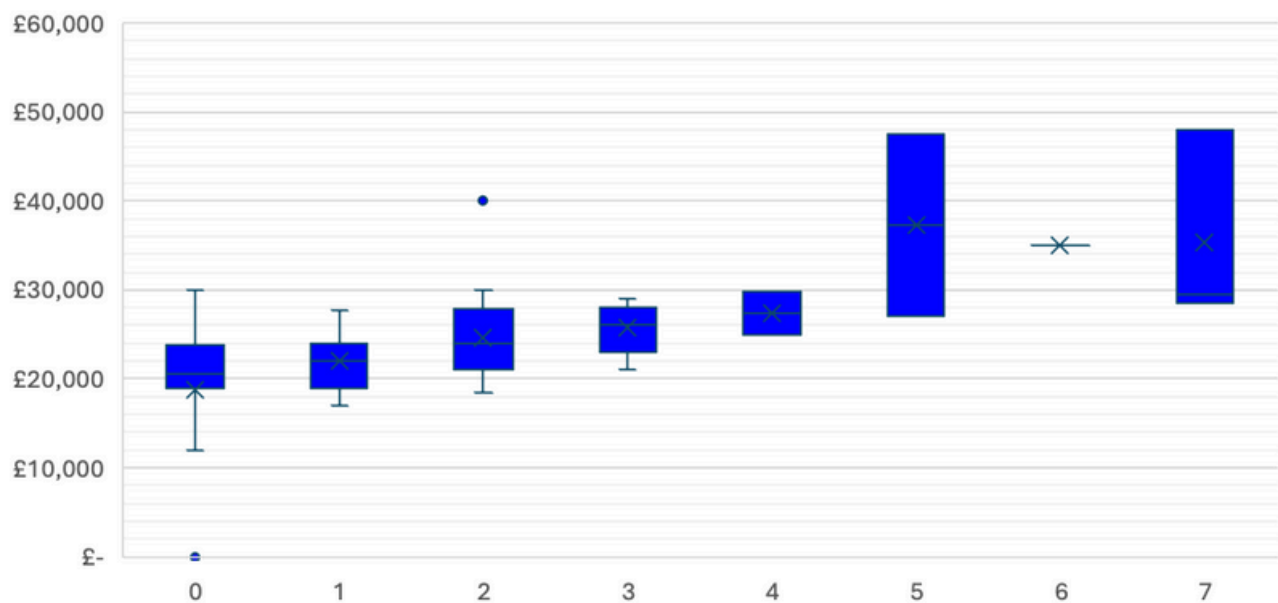
**Apprenticeship Level:** Higher levels (e.g., Levels 5 and 6) typically result in greater salary growth due to the specialised skills acquired.

**Subject Type:** Apprenticeships in high-demand sectors like technology, engineering, and construction tend to offer faster salary growth compared to roles in fields with lower skill premiums.

## Current salaries by level



## Current salaries by years since apprenticeship started



## The good and the bad

### Positive

**Supportive and Inclusive Work Environment:** Apprentices frequently mentioned that they felt welcomed and supported. For example, one stated, "I have been supported well and mentored well, always kept busy," while another shared, "Friendly office and helpful people everywhere."

**Career Development Opportunities:** Many apprentices appreciated their employers' focus on growth. One said, "My employer is very supportive, and I have been given a lot of opportunities to progress my career," while another noted, "The wealth of learning opportunities has helped me work to a very high standard on large projects."

**Team and Community Spirit:** Several mentioned the importance of the team atmosphere, with quotes such as, "Surrounded by great people in work who are always happy to help me develop," and "There is always help present when you really need it, and the employees are good craic, making the day enjoyable."

**Flexible and Accommodating:** Some employers were praised for their flexibility, with one apprentice highlighting, "Support me in every way and are flexible with holidays and personal issues."

**Positive Employer Culture:** Many valued a strong company culture, noting aspects like "good office culture," "helpful dev team," and an environment where "people are happy with the job."

**Recognition and Mentorship:** Several apprentices noted being treated as valued team members rather than just apprentices. For example, one shared, "The employer has made me feel like a regular employee and not just an apprentice."

### Negative

**Pay Discrepancies:** A common concern was unfair compensation, with one apprentice stating, "It does feel a bit insulting to be paid less than other members of the team when I have more responsibilities and experience."

**Lack of Support and Training:** Some felt unsupported in their roles, with one noting, "There is no support with my on-the-job learning, and they are not supporting my desire to start my chartership journey."

**Limited Communication:** Poor communication about changes or lack of structured feedback was another issue, with one stating, "Limited communication regarding changes that highly affect my role."

**Unclear Career Progression:** Apprentices also cited the lack of structured development paths. One mentioned, "Not enough scope for growth/learning," while another said, "There is not any appraisal or targets to work towards."

**Lack of Remote Work Opportunities:** Several mentioned a desire for more flexibility, particularly around remote working, with one stating, "I wish there was more opportunity to work from home."

**Workload Challenges:** Some apprentices found balancing work and study challenging, with one sharing, "It can be very busy and full-on, and as a student, it is hard to balance work and studying."



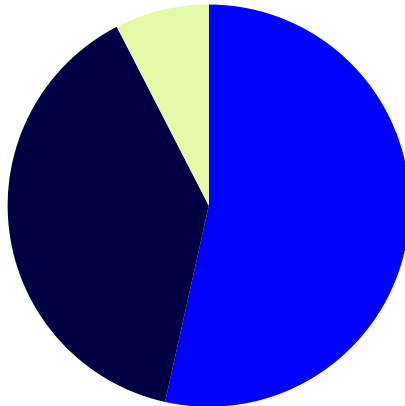
### 4.3.4 Working Pattern

Apprentices exhibit diverse preferences for hybrid working patterns, but most want to work in-person. Several themes emerged, highlighting positive and negative aspects of current practices, alongside potential recommendations for improvement.

The pie chart reveals additional data supporting the textual analysis. Preferences are distributed as follows:

#### I prefer to...

- Go to work in person
- Mix of in-person and virtual
- Work at home



### 4.3.5 Positive Factors

**Flexibility in Work Arrangements:** Many apprentices appreciate hybrid models that allow them to balance work, university studies, and personal commitments. For instance, one apprentice enjoys a schedule of two days in the office, two days at home, and one day at university, citing it as "perfect, just the right balance."

**Reduced Commute Burden:** For apprentices living far from their workplaces, the option to work from home reduces travel costs and time. One participant traveling an hour to the office noted how "one or two days WFH can help ease the traveling."

#### Mix of In-Person and Virtual

A significant portion of apprentices prefer a hybrid model. This aligns with the qualitative data where flexibility is consistently valued.

#### Predominantly In-Person Work

A notable number of apprentices favour on-site roles, likely due to the benefits of collaboration and ease of communication.

#### Fully Remote Work

A smaller group prefers working entirely from home, citing reduced commute times and increased comfort.

These insights highlight the importance of offering adaptable hybrid working patterns while maintaining support for those preferring more in-person or remote options.

**Improved Productivity and Comfort:** Several apprentices find working from home conducive to productivity, particularly for tasks that require deep focus. They also value the comfort and time-saving benefits of remote work, such as being able to study or spend time with family.

**Social and Professional Interaction:** Office days remain important for networking, collaboration, and learning. One apprentice highlighted the value of "seeing colleagues and raising pressing issues in person."

### 4.3.6 Negative Factors

#### **Commute-Heavy Expectations:**

Apprentices required to work primarily on-site mentioned difficulties in managing travel time and costs, especially when their roles could allow for remote work.

#### **Inconsistent Schedules:**

Apprentices with variable schedules face challenges in maintaining a steady work-life balance. The lack of a consistent pattern can make it harder to plan personal and academic activities.



### 4.3.7 Recommendations

#### **Establish Clear and Flexible Policies:**

Employers should create structured hybrid working policies that offer a consistent schedule while allowing adaptability based on apprentices' needs. For example, a common preference was two days in the office and two days at home.

#### **Incorporate Role-Specific Flexibility:**

Even for lab-based or site roles, employers could explore occasional work-from-home options for administrative tasks, reducing commuting burdens.

#### **Focus on Individual Needs:**

A personalised approach to hybrid working schedules could increase satisfaction and productivity. For example, one apprentice suggested the flexibility to vary work arrangements "depending on what is going on in life".

#### **Enhance On-Site Benefits:**

To make office days more appealing, employers might focus on fostering a collaborative and enjoyable environment. Social activities, as one apprentice noted, enhance the experience of working in the office.

#### **Regular Review of Working Patterns:**

Employers could periodically assess apprentices' satisfaction with their working arrangements to ensure policies remain aligned with their evolving needs and circumstances.

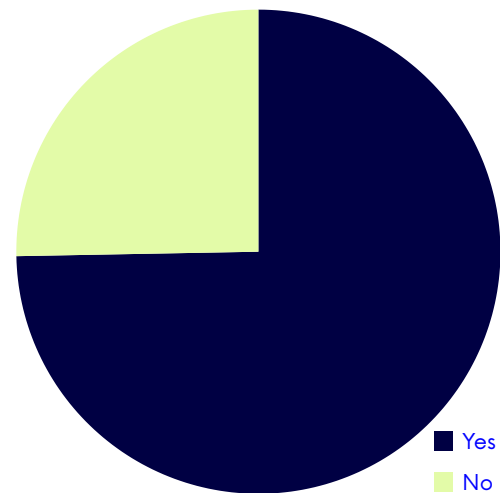
In conclusion, hybrid working is widely appreciated for its flexibility and potential to balance professional, academic, and personal demands. However, better integration of flexible policies and role-specific adjustments could enhance the experience for all apprentices.

### 4.3.8 Mentoring

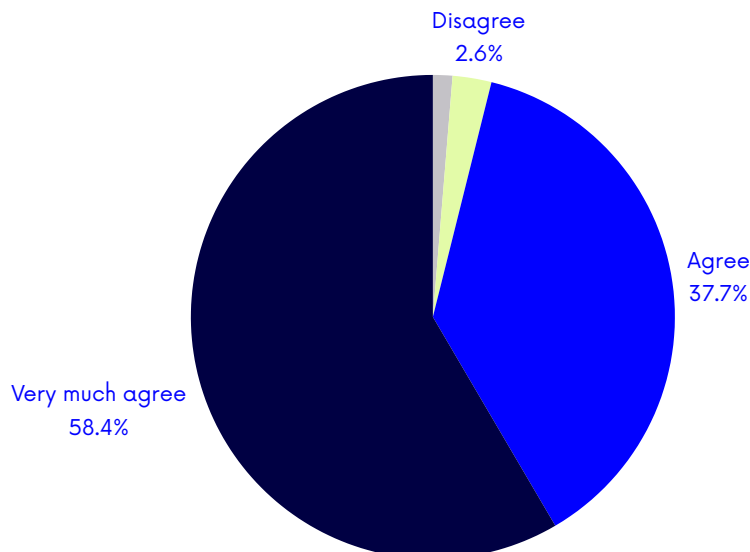
The chart to the right illustrates that while around 75% of apprentices benefit from having a workplace mentor, a significant proportion still lack access to this vital support.

Mentoring is a cornerstone of effective apprenticeship programs, offering guidance, skill development, and professional growth opportunities. Apprentices with mentors often report higher satisfaction, increased confidence, and a clearer understanding of career progression.

#### Do you have a workplace mentor?



#### I can go to my mentor at any time and ask for help



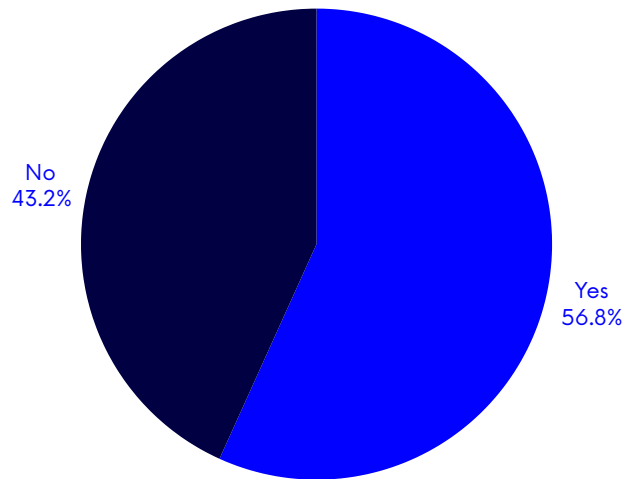
The chart to the left shows that most apprentices either strongly agree or agree that they can approach their mentors at any time for help, indicating a positive mentoring relationship for the majority. When mentors are approachable and supportive, apprentices are more likely to thrive professionally and personally.



Of those that do not have a mentor, 57% say that they would like one, a further indication of the desire for personal growth. The absence of mentors for many apprentices represents a missed opportunity for both individuals and organisations. Without mentoring, apprentices may struggle to integrate into their workplace, navigate challenges, or fully develop their potential.

To address this, employers should take proactive steps to embed mentoring into their apprenticeship programs. This includes appointing experienced employees as mentors, providing training on effective mentoring practices, and ensuring regular check-ins. By doing so, organisations can not only improve apprentice retention and performance but also foster a culture of support and development that benefits the entire workforce.

### Would you like a workplace mentor?



## 4.3.9 Recommendations for improving apprentice employment

Based on the feedback, employers can enhance the apprenticeship experience by addressing the following:

**Fair and Competitive Compensation:** Ensure apprentices are fairly compensated for their responsibilities and experience. Transparent pay structures can also address concerns about pay discrepancies.

**Structured Training and Development:** Implement clear training programs and mentorship opportunities. Regular appraisals and career progression pathways can help apprentices feel valued and supported.

**Improved Communication:** Maintain open lines of communication about role expectations, changes in apprenticeship structures, and opportunities for development.

**Flexible Working Arrangements:** Consider offering remote or hybrid work options where possible to accommodate apprentices' needs.

**Enhanced Support Systems:** Ensure apprentices have access to mentors, managers, and resources to support both their professional and personal growth.

**Recognition of Contributions:** Regularly acknowledge and reward apprentices for their contributions to create a sense of value and belonging.

By addressing these areas, employers can foster a more supportive and enriching environment for their apprentices, ultimately benefiting both the apprentices and the organisation.

## 4.4 Perspectives on learning

### 4.4.1 Introduction

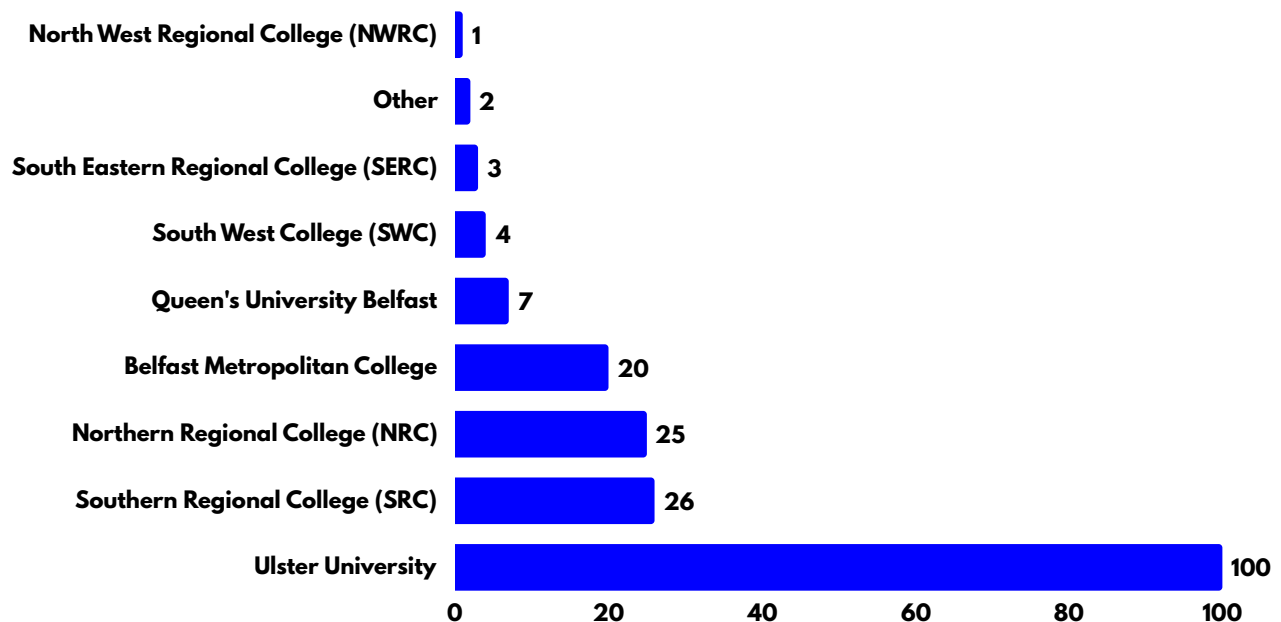
Learning providers play a critical role in the success of apprenticeships, serving as the bridge between academic theory and practical workplace application. They deliver the structured educational foundation that underpins the hands-on experience apprentices gain in their roles.

By aligning course content with industry needs, learning providers ensure that apprentices are equipped with relevant knowledge and skills that directly enhance their job performance. Additionally, they provide a support system through tutors and resources, helping apprentices balance the dual demands of work and study.

A strong partnership between learning providers and employers is essential to create a cohesive apprenticeship experience, ensuring that apprentices are not only learning but also applying their knowledge effectively in real-world contexts.

When learning providers prioritise flexibility, consistency, and communication, they empower apprentices to succeed both academically and professionally, fostering long-term career development.

### Which learning provider are you studying with?



Apprentices shared a mix of positive and negative perspectives about their learning providers, reflecting a range of experiences. While most praised the support and flexibility they received, a minority highlighted areas requiring significant improvement.

#### 4.4.2 Positive Perspectives

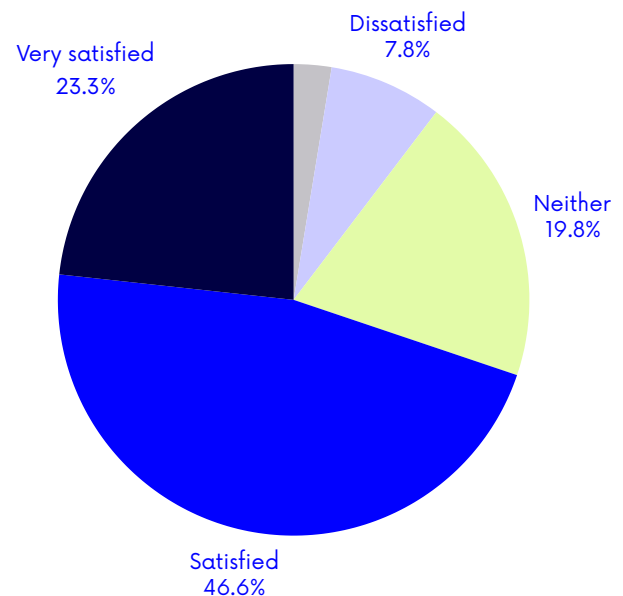
Many apprentices appreciated the support provided by their tutors and lecturers. One apprentice noted, "Personal tutors are very transparent with the next steps involved in our course," demonstrating a clear pathway for academic progression. Another highlighted the accommodating nature of their learning provider, stating, "...go above and beyond to help out their students. They have a really good understanding that we are also working full-time jobs."

The relevance and quality of course content were also commended by several apprentices. For example, one shared, "The course content is directly related to my job, and the tutors are helpful and friendly." Flexibility was another recurring theme, with apprentices valuing adaptations made to the course structure. As one remarked, "My lecturers are very adaptable to what we believe is working well for the course, for example, changing to three weeks online and one week in college."

#### 4.4.3 Areas for improvement

Despite these positives, apprentices raised several concerns. A common issue was the lack of organisation and structure in some courses. One apprentice described their experience as, "There is no proper structure. For example, even finding the work can be difficult as the work on the systems can be all over the place."

#### How satisfied are you with your learning provider?



Additionally, the availability of online resources was appreciated by apprentices who needed to balance their work and studies. "They have all material online so I can go back and look at it afterwards," said one apprentice, reflecting the importance of accessible learning materials.

The relevance of course content was another significant concern. Some apprentices felt disconnected from the material, with one stating, "Much of the stuff we are learning is not being practically applied to the job. It feels more like something we dedicate time to on the side rather than something that helps us with current issues we face on the job."

Support from staff was reported as inconsistent. While some tutors were praised for being knowledgeable and eager to help, others were criticised for their lack of engagement. One apprentice commented, "Some tutors are knowledgeable and eager to help you learn; however, some are not overly helpful."

The workload was another frequent challenge. Apprentices found it difficult to balance the demands of full-time work and university studies. Group work was particularly problematic, as one apprentice explained, "Group work does not work for apprentices. We work in groups every day at work; why should we have to do group work in uni?"

#### 4.4.4 Recommendations for improvement to learning

To address these challenges, apprentices suggested several improvements:

##### 1. Improved Organisation and Timetabling

Apprentices recommended restructuring timetables to better accommodate their work commitments.

##### 2. More Practical and Relevant Course Content

Courses should be more aligned with apprentices' real-world job requirements. One suggestion was to integrate current workplace challenges into the curriculum, as apprentices often feel their coursework is disconnected from their professional roles.

##### 3. Enhanced Support and Engagement from Staff

Apprentices expressed a need for more consistent and proactive support from lecturers. Providing individual mentors or designated points of contact could help address this issue.

##### 4. Flexible Workload Management

Providers should consider reducing unnecessary burdens, such as group projects, and offering more flexibility in how coursework is completed.

##### 5. Acknowledging Apprentices' Unique Needs

Learning providers should create policies that reflect the dual responsibilities apprentices face, ensuring that expectations are realistic and manageable.

By addressing these areas, learning providers could significantly enhance the experience of apprentices, supporting them in achieving their academic and professional goals while reducing unnecessary stress and frustration.

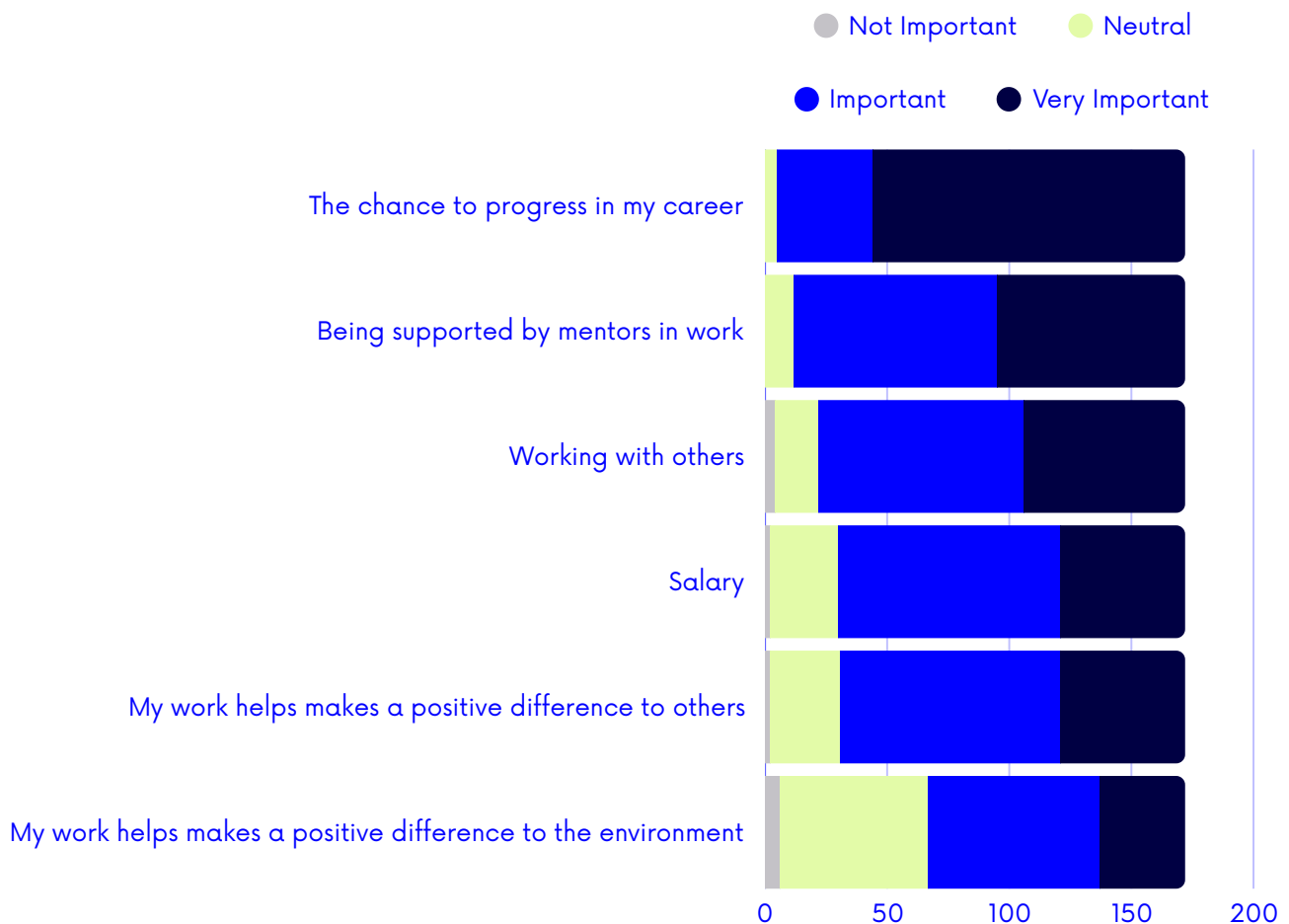


## 4.5 Apprentice motivations and future outlook

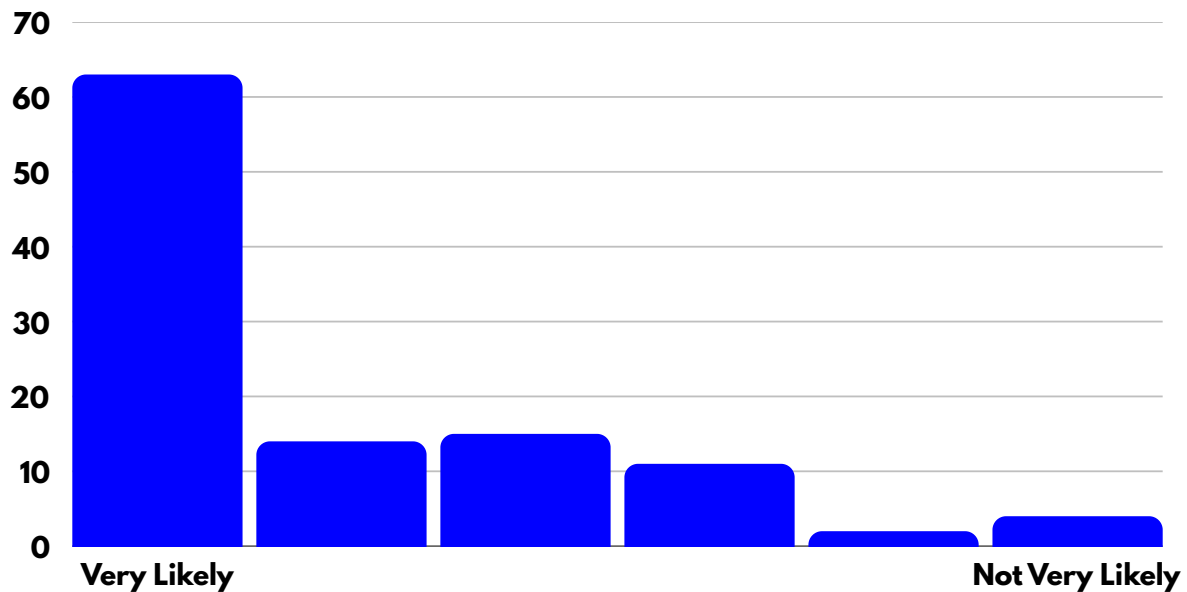
Apprentices place a strong emphasis on career progression, with 95% rating it as an important or very important aspect of their experience. Collaboration also ranks highly, with 87% highlighting working with others as very important or important.

Being mentored is also a significant priority, but interestingly, apprentices are equally driven by making a positive difference to others as they are by salary, suggesting a balance between altruistic and financial motivations. However, making a positive difference to the environment ranks as their lowest priority.

### What is important to you?

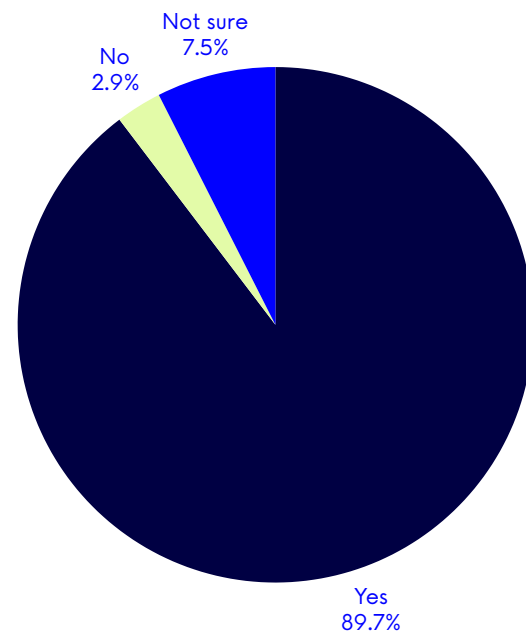


## How likely is it that you will recommend an apprenticeship to a friend?



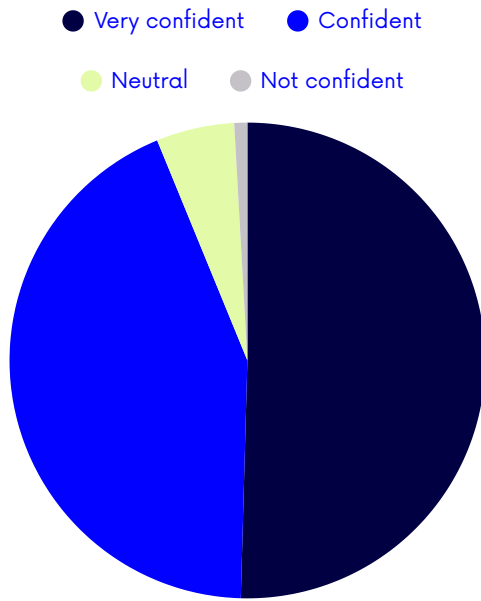
## Is your apprenticeship meeting your expectations?

In the chart to the right the overwhelming majority indicated that their apprenticeship is meeting their expectations. A smaller portion expressed uncertainty, while a minimal percentage reported that their expectations were not being met. This suggests a generally positive outlook on apprenticeship satisfaction, with only a few areas for potential improvement or clarification.





## How confident are you about your career prospects after completing your apprenticeship?



When asked about their confidence for the future, most apprentices feel either very confident or confident about their future opportunities. A smaller section, depicted in green, remains neutral, while a minimal percentage, shown in grey, reported not feeling confident. Overall, the data reflects a positive outlook among apprentices, with the majority optimistic about their career prospects.



## 5.0 Recommendations

The findings of this report highlight the **overwhelming success of apprenticeships**.

To ensure the success and sustainability of apprenticeship programmes, this section offers targeted recommendations for key stakeholders: employers, learning providers, and policymakers.

### 5.1 For Employers

**Create more apprenticeships:** more employers embracing apprenticeships and widening their vision of the available pathways.

**Enhance Retention Strategies:** Implement mentorship programmes and clear career progression pathways to retain apprentices and maximise their potential.

**Invest in Training and Development:** Provide ongoing professional development opportunities tailored to apprentices' needs, ensuring alignment with evolving industry demands.

**Strengthen Apprentice Relationships:** Foster a culture of inclusion, open communication, and mutual respect to build long-term loyalty.

**Collaborate with Learning Providers:** Actively engage with training providers to design curricula that reflect current and future industry trends.

**Promote Apprenticeship Opportunities:** Increase outreach and awareness campaigns to attract diverse candidates, focusing on underrepresented groups.



## 5.2 For Learning Providers

### Further Align Curricula with Industry Needs:

Work more closely with employers to ensure that programmes equip apprentices with relevant learning which supports their work.

### Improve Support Systems

Provide robust pastoral care, mental health resources, and academic support to help apprentices navigate challenges.

**Facilitate Employer-Apprentice Feedback Loops:** Establish regular forums for stakeholders to discuss progress, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

### Apprentices' Unique Needs

Learning providers should create policies that reflect the dual responsibilities apprentices face, ensuring that expectations are realistic and manageable.

## 5.3 For Policymakers

### Increase Funding and Incentives

Boost financial support to employers, encouraging broader participation and sustainability of apprenticeship programmes.

### Streamline Regulations

Simplify apprenticeship processes to reduce administrative burden and incentivise employer engagement.

### Promote Apprenticeships as Prestigious Career Pathways

Launch campaigns with real apprentices and employers to elevate apprenticeships with employers as part of their talent pipeline

### Support Centralised Information Systems:

Fund and promote centralised platforms listing apprenticeship opportunities to simplify applicant navigation and choice.





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