

# Apprenticeships as a Catalyst for Inclusive Economic Growth in Northern Ireland

**Una McCabe**

*Una McCabe is a dynamic leader whose career bridges social policy, youth advocacy, and industry innovation. Holding a BSc (Hons) in Social Administration and Policy, a master's degree in Social Work, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Interior Architecture, Una brings a multidisciplinary lens to workforce development and social inclusion.*



*Her professional experience spans both sides of the Irish border, where she worked extensively as a social work practitioner and manager, specialising in supporting young people in the care system, many of whom face systemic barriers to education and employment.*

*As the architect and lead of the MEGA mentoring programme, Una has helped to transform the mentoring landscape in Northern Ireland's engineering sector. The programme has become a cornerstone of modern apprenticeship success, widely recognised for its impact on attracting diverse talent, developing work-ready apprentices, and retaining young professionals in high-value industries. By embedding structured mentorship into the apprenticeship journey, MEGA fosters trust, resilience, and long-term career growth. It leverages seasoned professionals to guide mentees, while also upskilling mentors in coaching and leadership, creating a virtuous cycle of development and engagement.*

## **Introduction: MEGA – Shaping the future of skills and industry**

In Northern Ireland’s rapidly evolving economic landscape, the need for a skilled, agile, and inclusive workforce has never been more critical. At the forefront of this transformation stands MEGA – the Manufacturing & Engineering Growth & Advancement cluster.

Founded in 2019 as an industry-led collaborative cluster, MEGA unites employers, educators, and policy-makers with a single purpose: to develop the talent and innovation capacity needed to drive sustainable economic growth. Its members represent the backbone of Northern Ireland’s advanced manufacturing and engineering sector—industries that are central to regional productivity, exports, and technological advancement.

Through partnerships with South West College, the Department for the Economy (DfE), and a wide range of local employers, MEGA designs and delivers initiatives that connect young people, career changers, and businesses with meaningful opportunities. Whether through structured apprenticeship programmes, work-readiness development, or industry mentoring, MEGA’s approach ensures that training is directly aligned with employer needs.

More than a skills initiative, MEGA is a movement for inclusive growth—ensuring that opportunities in engineering, manufacturing, and technology are accessible to everyone, regardless of background or geography.

## **Apprenticeships: A strategic engine for economic transformation**

Apprenticeships are a vital mechanism for bridging the gap between education and employment, offering individuals hands-on experience while supplying industries with the skilled talent they need to thrive. In Northern Ireland, their strategic importance is reflected across several cornerstone policies, including the Department for the Economy’s *Apprenticeship Action Plan (2025–2028)*, the *Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy* and the *Ulster University Skills Barometer (2023–2033)*.

Each of these initiatives underscores the role of apprenticeships not only as pathways into work but as drivers of inclusive economic development.

- **The Apprenticeship Action Plan** outlines three strategic pillars – improve, grow, and include – aiming to create a more effective and equitable system that enhances employer engagement and broadens participation.
- **The Skills Barometer** provides long-term insights into Northern Ireland’s future skills demands, identifying critical gaps in sectors such as engineering, ICT, health, and construction.
- **The 10X Economy Strategy** envisions a decade of transformation driven by innovation, digital capability, and inclusivity—placing apprenticeships at the centre of this ambition.

Together, these frameworks signal a unified policy direction: that apprenticeships are not merely training routes but key instruments for building economic resilience and social mobility.

## Employer benefits and barriers

For employers, apprenticeships offer an opportunity to shape talent directly aligned to business needs. Apprentices typically deliver measurable returns on investment within their first year of training and are more likely to remain loyal to their employers in the long term.

However, several barriers continue to inhibit full engagement:

- **Complex funding systems:** SMEs often find apprenticeship funding mechanisms confusing or administratively burdensome.
- **Curriculum alignment:** Employers report that academic content can lag behind real-world technological advancements, particularly in rapidly evolving industries.
- **Mentoring capacity:** Providing quality supervision and mentoring can be resource-intensive, especially for smaller firms.
- **Soft skills gaps:** Many apprentices require additional development in communication, teamwork, and workplace behaviours before they are fully work-ready.

These challenges underscore the need for ongoing reform and closer collaboration between education and industry.

## Strategic solutions and MEGA's role

To strengthen apprenticeship outcomes and employer engagement, several strategic solutions are emerging:

- **Simplify funding and access:** Clearer guidance for SMEs and clusters, such as MEGA, would help streamline access to financial support and reduce administrative friction.
- **Expand modular and hybrid learning:** Micro-credentials and flexible training models can better accommodate modern business operations.
- **Enhance co-designed curricula:** Continuous dialogue between employers and training providers ensures relevance, agility, and mutual trust.
- **Invest in regional, industry-led training centres:** Such centres can deliver accessible, locally relevant programmes that align with sectoral needs and provide pathways for underrepresented groups.

MEGA exemplifies how these strategies can work in practice. By embedding mentorship, work-readiness training, and employer collaboration into its initiatives, the network has developed a model that not only improves apprenticeship retention but also strengthens Northern Ireland's overall skills pipeline.

## European best practice: Lessons in partnership

Northern Ireland can draw inspiration from thriving apprenticeship ecosystems across Europe:

- **Germany's** dual system integrates classroom learning with company-based training, ensuring strong employer involvement and exceptional completion rates.
- **Switzerland** offers apprenticeships in over 230 occupations, with more than 70% of young people entering vocational routes that directly feed the economy.
- **Austria** maintains standardised national frameworks that drive consistency and quality across all sectors.

- **Denmark's** flexible, partnership-based approach enables social partners to quickly adapt programmes to market needs.

These models demonstrate that sustained success relies on shared responsibility between government, industry, and education—a principle MEGA continues to champion in Northern Ireland.

## **Work readiness and mentorship: Foundations for success**

A persistent challenge in the local apprenticeship landscape is work readiness. Employers frequently note that new apprentices struggle with punctuality, teamwork, and professional communication—competencies essential for modern workplaces.

Addressing this requires structured pre-apprenticeship training focused on developing soft skills and workplace behaviours before individuals enter formal employment.

Equally crucial is mentorship. MEGA's mentoring programme, delivered in partnership with South West College, has become a model of best practice. It matches experienced professionals with apprentices, offering guidance, support, and skills transfer. Mentors are upskilled in coaching and leadership, creating a mutually beneficial learning environment that enhances confidence, engagement, and retention.

By integrating mentorship as a formal component of apprenticeship frameworks, Northern Ireland can ensure that apprentices are not only trained but also transformed into capable and confident contributors to the workforce.

## **Industry-led apprenticeship centres: Building a resilient skills ecosystem**

To fully unlock apprenticeship potential, Northern Ireland must invest in industry-led training centres designed and operated in close partnership with employers.

Such centres – modelled on England's successful Group Training Association (GTA) approach – ensure that curricula, equipment, and delivery are

grounded in real industry needs. They create hubs where SMEs and large firms can collaborate, share resources, and co-design training programmes that reflect technological and market developments.

These centres also act as regional anchors, supporting local employment, enhancing productivity, and fostering innovation. For government and funders, they represent a high-impact investment in both skills development and economic inclusion.

## **Cross-border integration: A shared opportunity**

Northern Ireland's geographic and economic proximity to the Republic of Ireland offers enormous potential for cross-border apprenticeship collaboration. However, differing frameworks and qualification standards currently limit mobility and recognition.

A harmonised, all-island apprenticeship model, aligned with European best practice, could remove these barriers. By standardising qualifications, assessment methods, and certification, both jurisdictions could enable apprentices and employers to work seamlessly across borders.

Such integration would enhance regional competitiveness, support shared industries like manufacturing, construction, and ICT, and strengthen the collective workforce of the island economy.

## **Conclusion: Collaboration as the cornerstone of growth**

Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland represent more than an entry point into work—they are a strategic lever for inclusive growth, social mobility, and regional prosperity. Grounded in robust policy frameworks, such as the *Apprenticeship Action Plan*, the *Skills Barometer*, and the *Skills for a 10X Economy*, they provide a sustainable solution to the challenges of skills shortages, productivity gaps, and economic inequality.

But policies alone are not enough. Real progress depends on collaboration—between government, employers, education providers, and cluster organisations like MEGA. Together, these stakeholders can build a skills ecosystem that is agile, inclusive, and resilient.

By embracing mentorship, simplifying access for SMEs, investing in regional training hubs, and advancing cross-border cooperation, Northern Ireland can

establish a globally recognised apprenticeship model that fuels innovation and opportunity for all.

Apprenticeships are not merely a route into work – they are the foundation upon which a dynamic, future-ready Northern Ireland can be built.