

ASTI Opening Statement on Apprenticeships

The ASTI is delighted to be presenting today on the lived experience of apprentices across Ireland. This conversation matters. It connects directly to the work we do every day in our classrooms, especially in STEM subjects, which must be properly resourced if students are to develop the confidence, skills, and readiness to pursue all pathways—including apprenticeships. A strong apprenticeship system depends on a strong, well-resourced school system, and teachers are central to that.

The newly published National Apprenticeship Office Survey 2024 provides us with the strongest set of data yet on the lived experience of apprentices. It confirms what teachers already know: apprenticeships offer powerful opportunities, but too many young people are still finding their way into them by accident rather than design.

The evidence is striking. 62% of apprentices learned about their apprenticeship from family and friends (NAO, 2025). Only a small minority reported hearing about apprenticeships from guidance counsellors or teachers. This is not a reflection on our guidance colleagues—it is a reflection of a system that has not invested in guidance since the cuts of 2009 and that has not built the necessary infrastructure to give students full, informed access to all pathways. ASTI has consistently argued that you cannot widen participation without properly resourcing guidance. The NAO survey reinforces that message.

Despite these barriers, apprentices thrive when they enter their chosen field. 94% believe their apprenticeship will provide good employment opportunities, 87% are enjoying the experience, and 94% feel they contribute positively in the workplace (NAO, 2025). These are extraordinarily high satisfaction levels. They prove that apprenticeships are not a “second-choice” route. They are high-quality programmes that meet the needs of a wide variety of learners, including those who prefer hands-on experience or vocationally aligned study.

Yet alongside the success, the challenges are real. 38% of apprentices have seriously considered withdrawing, and financial pressures are the leading cause. Many feel overwhelmed by the study component: 39% say the academic demand is difficult, and 40% struggle to keep up outside work hours (NAO, 2025). This is a reminder that every pathway requires academic, financial and personal support.

There are also issues around access and equality. 16% faced barriers securing an employer, often due to lack of connections. 7% reported discrimination, most of it in the workplace. And although 90% of female apprentices report a positive experience, only 22.5% said they were encouraged by a teacher to pursue apprenticeship routes (NAO, 2025). This reflects cultural assumptions that still shape subject choice.

For ASTI, these findings speak to three priorities.

First, career guidance must be restored and expanded. Structured guidance is not reaching enough students at the right time. Decision-making is uneven, shaped by family capital rather than equality of opportunity. ASTI policy has long argued that guidance is essential for social mobility and informed choice—and this survey provides fresh evidence that investment is overdue.

Second, we must challenge the myth that pathways are linear or hierarchical. Every student should have access to the full spectrum of progression routes—Further Education and Training, apprenticeships, higher education—without stigma or constraint.

Third, the system must listen to the voices of apprentices themselves. Their feedback on workload, mentoring, assessment, and the need for modernised learning environments must shape the next stage of national policy.

Apprenticeships work and this is supported by data. But if we want these routes to be accessible, equitable and sustainable, the system must invest in guidance, in student supports, and in removing the barriers that limit choice.

ASTI will continue to advocate for an education system where every pathway is properly resourced, every learner is supported, and every young person can choose their future with confidence.