

Engineering a bright future for Airbus

The Airbus Higher Engineering Apprenticeship programme is a prime example of an employer-led, work-based progression route designed by industry, sector bodies and HE partners to develop a higher level workforce

Airbus is one of the world's leading aircraft design and manufacturing companies. Innovation and excellence sit at the heart of the company's mission and it boasts an impressive record of technological firsts.

The company understands that the need for its workforce to be adaptable and responsive to ever-changing market needs and the recruitment and retention of a highly talented workforce is essential if it is to continue to stay ahead of the game. It has developed the largest engineering manufacturing apprenticeship programme in the UK, with up to 600 in training every year.

To attract new talent from a diverse range of backgrounds, Airbus has led on the design and development of an innovative work-based learning progression route that has the potential to take school leavers with GCSEs through to university level and professional qualifications. The Higher Engineering Apprenticeship scheme blends higher level theoretical study with extensive 'on the job' learning. As Airbus has been involved in its creation and delivery, programme content is completely focused on the business needs of the organisation.

"Airbus apprentice qualifications are among the best in the industry and provide an unbeatable opportunity to fulfill career aspirations." Semta.

The programme brings together partners from industry, sector bodies and education. Airbus works with Deeside College, Glyndwr University and Semta (the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies) to develop, validate and deliver the apprenticeships and related training programmes and qualifications. The programme is now regarded by Semta as a model progression route for apprentices and is also accredited by the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAeS) and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE).

Win-win for employer and employees

The apprenticeship scheme offers an opportunity to gain invaluable work experience, with most going on to secure permanent posts alongside the company's 52,000 employees worldwide.

One of the biggest attractions of the programme is that it offers a great alternative to the traditional university approach. It offers a competitive salary on entry and paid holiday. Also, apprentices pay no tuition fees.

There are two levels: the Craft Apprenticeship (Level 3); and the Higher Apprenticeship - Levels 4 and 5, including the Foundation degree (FdEng) in Aeronautical Engineering. A bridging programme provides a route to a BEng (Hons) degree and a MSc in Composite Manufacture for Aerospace Technology will be available from September 2010.

A CPD programme is also in place to support apprentices in gaining Chartered Engineer (IMechE) status, which Airbus actively encourages. The route from Craft Apprentice to Chartered Engineer typically takes nine years to complete.

Co-funded by Airbus, DCELLS and HEFCW, the scheme represents a significant investment for the company – it estimates that each fully qualified higher apprentice costs the company well over £50,000 including salaries, benefits and training costs.

However, Airbus considers that the rewards to the company make this investment worthwhile, impacting directly on loyalty and staff retention.

Peter Ford, Training Partner for Airbus comments:

“Many of our qualified engineers have come through the routes of Craft and Higher Apprenticeships and 70% of the company’s Senior Management Team have also come through this route. Several ex-Craft apprentices have completed the Higher apprentices programme incorporating the Foundation Degree and then subsequently progressed through to complete their BEng Honours Degree.”

Flying high

Paul Brotherton is in the second year of his Higher Apprenticeship at the Airbus site in Broughton, North Wales.

“My progression at work has allowed me to experience first-hand and understand many aspects of jobs at Airbus,” explains Paul.

“During my Craft Apprenticeship I was involved in manufacturing aircraft parts and now in computer-based design. Once I have completed my Higher Apprenticeship, I will have achieved Professional Engineer status and will have the choice of working in manufacturing, quality or design. My preference would be to work in design and I aim to progress to a master’s degree while working for Airbus.



“The Higher Apprenticeship for me is very different to the Craft Apprenticeship in that it has more academic content, but because it is so closely linked with the practical aspects of my work I am coping well with studying for the Foundation degree.”

A typical week for Paul combines a demanding job with studying - three and a half days working full-time, gathering evidence and undergoing NVQ assessment, one full 9-7 day at college working on the Foundation degree and a half day studying for all qualifications and meeting with tutors and assessors on site. He feels more than adequately supported to complete his apprenticeship:

“Support for learners is extensive and fully integrated with the working environment,” adds Paul. “Some of the staff teaching on the Foundation degree route are ex-apprentices and employees of Airbus, so are in touch with its changing business needs.

Staff from Deeside College are based on-site and offer support when needed through regular meetings or drop-in “surgeries”.

Support is also provided by the company’s on-site Training Department, line managers and colleagues. A mentor is appointed within each team the apprentice works in.

