

Career versus Degree? You choose!

Deciding what to do after you finish your A-levels is a big decision. You might be asking yourself, 'do I enter the world of work with an apprenticeship, or should I go to university?' Find out which is the best route for you

The degree versus apprenticeship debate is long running and choosing your next educational move requires careful consideration. Higher education continues to be a popular option despite the rise in tuition fees, with 230,600 18-year-olds across the UK accepted onto degree courses in 2023 – this is down 2.6% on the previous year.

However, attitudes to apprenticeships have also evolved and they are now recognised as an equal alternative to university. Since 2014, 56,200 workers have enrolled on higher and degree apprenticeships, studying a range of qualifications from foundation degree level to full Masters.

The main benefits of each option can be summarised as follows:

- **Going to university** - you will be able to pick from thousands of courses, a degree will leave your career more open-ended in terms of future opportunities and you'll acquire a whole range of soft skills, transferrable to any job role.
- **Doing an apprenticeship** - you will be gaining valuable on-the-job experience and earning money as you study. You will also be exempt from paying tuition fees.

Here we weigh up the benefits of each option in more detail to help make a tricky decision that little bit easier. If you're still unsure, be comforted by the fact that it isn't a case of choosing university or apprenticeship - it's possible to do both.

What subjects are on offer?

If you choose to study at university, you'll be able to pick from thousands of courses. This variety can be useful if you are unsure of what to do after graduation as you can opt for a broader subject and keep your options open.

You might also be surprised at the scope of apprenticeships on offer. They are no longer dominated by the manual trades and the engineering sector, and instead span a range of industries including accountancy, IT, law, media, publishing and journalism.

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What will I learn?

Although vocational degrees are on the rise, university study is primarily focused on education and research. Following a theory-based approach, you will learn about your subject through lectures, seminars and workshops, and graduate with a Bachelors degree. You'll then head out into the world of work to test your knowledge and put into practice what you've learned.

Apprenticeships appeal to those looking for **alternatives to university** as they take a more practical approach to learning. You'll focus on training for a specific career and learn your trade by actually doing the job.

You will gain hands-on experience and have the opportunity to apply your skills immediately. On completion you could hold an NVQ, HNC or HND, while higher apprenticeships can lead to a foundation degree and **degree apprenticeships** can result in a full honours degree.

What job opportunities are available?

A university education allows you to target a broader range of careers than you can through an apprenticeship, but both will stand you in good stead when it comes to looking for a job.

Apprenticeships are restrictive in the sense that the training and skills that you gain are specific to a particular industry or role. However, if you're confident in your career choice you'll be well equipped to take advantage of apprenticeship opportunities.

Bear in mind that, in sectors such as healthcare, business and science, you'll need a degree to enter certain professions. These professions include:

- **ecologist**
- **hospital doctor**
- **psychotherapist**
- **psychiatrist**
- **surgeon**

Other sectors benefit from the practical, on-the-job training that higher and degree apprenticeships provide, such as roles in **engineering and manufacturing**, **property and construction** and **the media**.

Find out more about **engineering apprenticeships**, or browse our **job profiles** to discover whether you'll need to pursue university or an apprenticeship for your chosen career.

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How much will it cost?

Apprenticeships undoubtedly win this round. If you are under 25 the government and your employer fund your training so you don't have to pay a penny.

On the other hand studying for a degree will cost you £9,250 per year in tuition fees, plus additional living expenses. It is estimated that an undergraduate could leave university with up to £50,000 worth of debt. However, you will not start repayments until you earn a minimum of £26,575 a year.

What will I earn?

If you opt for university, you'll have to wait until after graduation to start earning a full-time wage. As an apprentice, you'll earn while you learn and receive the national minimum wage for apprentices. If you are aged between 16 and 18 the rate currently stands at £3.90. This rate also applies to those aged 19 or over who are currently in their first year of training.

The earning potential of university graduates and apprentices has been examined in recent research by [The Sutton Trust](#), which found that top apprentices could expect to earn thousands more in their lifetime than undergraduates from a non-Russell Group university.

In fact, those who opt to study for a level 5 higher apprenticeship will earn £1.5million during the course of their career, almost £52,000 more than graduates from non-elite universities who can expect to earn £1.4million. However, students from top Russell Group universities come out on top with estimated lifetime earnings of £1.6million.

What do employers think?

Both methods of study are highly regarded by employers. University is respected for the depth of knowledge and transferrable skills it provides, while apprenticeships are valued for their practical nature and real-life work experience opportunities.

More organisations than ever before are offering apprenticeship schemes as employers come to view this method of training as a viable alternative to a university degree. However, educated graduates are in high demand and look set to remain so for the foreseeable future.

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If you have ambitions to work for a particular company it might be helpful to find out what they look for in a candidate, which do they value most, qualifications or experience? This could help when making your decision.

It's a tough choice to make and one option isn't necessarily better than the other. Take a look at your current situation - consider what qualifications you already hold, what you'd like to study, your finances and what you'd like to do in the future. Do some research and choose the best option for you.

You could work towards an apprenticeship and then go to university or similarly get a degree and then do an apprenticeship. However, if you pick the latter course of action, the same apprenticeship funding might not be available.