

## Apprenticeships - worth a look?

Now that the UCAS application season is drawing to a close, I thought it would be useful to turn attention to Apprenticeships and consider how they are becoming **a real alternative for young people** as they consider their next steps after Sixth Form. There has been a lot of talk in the news recently about the government's relaunch of Apprenticeships and there probably is no better time to consider them as the step up from Sixth Form to employment.

Recent research issued by the National Apprenticeship Service revealed that **44% of businesses in the UK are planning to take on apprentices in the coming five years**. This is clearly an indication of the high regard in which they are held by the business world.

According to figures from the government's Office for Fair Access, the average cost of going to university for a three-year degree will be around £28,941. When you consider this figure, it is completely understandable that more and more Sixth Form students are considering Apprenticeships as an alternative to university. However, as always this choice is not so straight forward and **it's important that you consider what's best for you and your career pathway**. The student loan that most university students take out is still a very good deal and should be considered as an investment rather than a debt. Not all Apprenticeships lead to a full time job and often the pay will be below the minimum wage level.

However, if an Apprenticeship route is something you should consider, let's look at the key elements that will help you make the right choice:

- An Apprenticeship is not a qualification in itself but a number of separately certified qualifications, courses and workplace training, that make up what is referred to as the 'apprenticeship framework'. Though each Apprenticeship will be different, depending on the specific industry or job role, **all Apprenticeships will develop the practical and theoretical skills** designed to help employees reach a high level of competency and performance for that particular job role/area.
- There are **different levels of framework** and Apprentices can progress from the initial Level 2 framework through to the Advanced Level 3 framework. Higher Level 4 Apprenticeship frameworks are being developed. Sixth Form students will normally be looking to apply for Higher Level Apprenticeships as these normally require A Levels or equivalent e.g. BTEC qualifications, as part of their entry criteria, though with more technical roles it may be necessary to start at a lower level.
- Embarking on an Apprenticeship means gaining access to all the employees within an organisation, as well as the companies that they deal with on a daily basis such as distributors, resellers and suppliers. There will be many **opportunities to talk to, and network with, all the different functions within a business**, such as sales, marketing, finance, development and IT support.

## Which level?

- **Level 2 or Intermediate Apprenticeships** are equivalent to five good GCSE passes. These Apprenticeships designed specifically to allow the individual to work towards work-based learning qualifications such as NVQ level 2 as well as a relevant work based qualification such as a BTEC. These types of Apprenticeships provide the entity skills for many job roles and would also allow entry to an Advanced Apprenticeship.
- **Advanced Level 3 Apprenticeships** are equivalent to two A Level passes – perfect for people already in a supervisory or managerial role, or for employees looking to attain the skills required to reach this level. These Apprenticeships usually require applicants to have five good GCSE passes or to have completed an Intermediate Apprenticeship.
- Higher Apprenticeships work towards NVQ Level 4 work based qualifications. A new offer are **Degree Apprenticeships** and a number of institutions such as Staffordshire University now offer a range of these qualifications which allow you to develop work specific skills and knowledge as well as studying for a degree. The benefit of this pathway is that you are paid a salary and your university course is free. These Apprenticeships usually require applicants to have 2 good A Level passes (can't include advanced BTECs) or have completed an Advanced Apprenticeship.

All Apprentices are employed with a contract of employment of 30 hours a week or more.

**The length of an Apprenticeship depends on the framework being followed**, level of qualification and the ability of the individual apprentice. An Apprenticeship can take between one and two years to complete depending on the level of Apprenticeship. As a rough guide, a Level 2 Apprenticeship usually takes around 12-18 months and an Advanced Level 3 Apprenticeship around 24 months. Degree Apprenticeships normally take 4-5 years to complete, though again there is some variation. A good place to start research for Degree Apprenticeships is <http://www.milkround.com/staticpages/150909/the-times-guide-to-higher-and-degree-apprenticeships/>

## On the job training

The key element of an Apprenticeship is that actual work experience counts for a lot in the workplace and many degrees are not vocational, meaning that graduates can find themselves leaving university with very few real-life skills. Choosing an Apprenticeship will mean that you will be working for part of your time in a real work place and this will help develop a clear advantage in terms of knowledge of the business world, compared to someone who has been through an academic degree at a university.

An Apprentice will build up knowledge and skills every day at work whilst still working towards a nationally recognised qualification. The type of the 'on the job training' will take many different forms across the different types and levels of apprenticeship. The most common programmes that you may find in Apprenticeships are as follows:

- **Block release:** The Apprentice attends college for one week blocks of training over the course of a year. Blocks of training are held every 4-6 weeks.
- **Day release:** The Apprentice attends college one day a week throughout the year. There will be breaks for holiday periods.
- **Training in the workplace:** Some Apprenticeship programmes are taught totally in the workplace.

All Apprentices are employed and have a contract of employment. Usually you will receive a salary that reflects the job role and the skills and experience of the applicant. The Apprenticeship minimum wage must be paid to all Apprentices who are under 19 or in the first year of their Apprenticeship. For those aged 19 and above in their second year of the Apprenticeship programme, the National Minimum wage applies.

In the next blog in March, we will look at how to prepare for this summer's revision season.