Hyfa | Foundation

ROUTE CHOICES

University, apprenticeship or work: how to compare what each route really gives you

10-MINUTE STUDENT GUIDE

> THE AIM
> **Make a well-researched next-step decision - not a perfect life decision. You can combine routes, change direction and return to learning later.**

Before you compare

1. Name the job or career area you are considering. A route only makes sense if it can take you where you want to go.
2. Compare real options: an actual course, an actual apprenticeship vacancy and an actual job - not ideal versions of each route.
3. Use the same six checks for every option: career access, money in, money out, future income, skills and fit, and risk.

This guide uses England funding figures for 2026-27. Your home nation usually decides your student finance, so use the Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland links at the end if that applies to you.

Know the routes

Route	How it works	Often strong for	Watch out for
University / HE	Structured academic or professional study. Full-time, part-time, local, residential or modular.	Deep subject knowledge, regulated professions, research, analysis and broad networks.	Living-cost gap, borrowing, course quality and later full-time earnings.
Apprenticeship	A paid job with approved occupational training and assessment.	Learning by doing, work experience, recognised competence and no learner tuition fee.	Competitive vacancies, variable quality and pay, and balancing work with study.
Direct employment	Start work without a formal apprenticeship or full-time HE course.	Immediate income, workplace skills, responsibility and employer training.	Training may be informal; progression can depend heavily on the employer.

CAREER GATE FIRST

Some careers require an approved qualification, registration or licence. Medicine usually needs an approved degree. Skilled trades may require an apprenticeship, cards or licences. Digital and creative roles may value a strong portfolio and experience. Check the exact occupation before comparing money.

Routes are not sealed boxes

1. A degree apprenticeship combines paid employment with degree-level learning.
2. A job can later lead to an apprenticeship, professional qualification or employer-sponsored degree.
3. University can include placements, internships, part-time work and professional accreditation.

Your 10-minute task

[ ] Write down one occupation you might want.

[ ] Check its required and preferred qualifications on the National Careers Service and the professional regulator, if there is one.

[ ] Find at least two possible entry routes and one way to progress later.

Money in: university and higher education

FOUR DIFFERENT KINDS OF MONEY

Keep earnings, repayable loans, non-repayable support, and money paid to a provider or employer in separate columns. They are not the same thing.

England support, 2026-27	Headline amount	What it means
Undergraduate Tuition Fee Loan	Up to £9,790 a year for a standard full-time course at an eligible fee-cap provider	Paid to the provider. Repayable under the relevant student-loan plan.
Maintenance Loan	Maximum £9,118 at home; £10,830 away outside London; £14,135 away in London	Paid to you for living costs. Household income affects the amount.
Postgraduate master's loan	Up to £13,206 for the whole course	A contribution to fees and living costs, not a guarantee that every cost is covered.
Postgraduate doctoral loan	Up to £31,122 for the whole course	Paid across the course; eligibility rules apply.
Lifelong Learning Entitlement	Up to £39,160 of tuition support for eligible study starting from 1 January 2027	Designed for eligible courses and modules; broadly around 480 credits.

Support you may not have to repay

1. Disabled Students' Allowance: up to £27,783 for eligible study-related support; it is not based on household income.
2. Dependants support: Childcare Grant, Parents' Learning Allowance and Adult Dependants' Grant may apply.
3. Care leavers who meet the rules can receive the maximum maintenance loan without means testing; provider bursaries may also exist.
4. Eligible nursing, midwifery and allied-health students may receive a £5,000 NHS Training Grant each academic year, with extra support in some cases.
5. University bursaries, scholarships and hardship funds vary. Never count them until eligibility and payment are confirmed in writing.

Maximums are not automatic entitlements. *Residency, previous study, course type, study intensity and the provider can change what you receive.*

Money in: apprenticeships and employment

Apprenticeship

1. You are an employee. You must be paid for working time and required training time.
2. From April 2026, the apprentice minimum is £8.00 an hour for apprentices under 19, or aged 19+ and in the first year. Many employers pay more.
3. For new starts from 1 August 2026, government funds eligible training and assessment up to the funding-band maximum for 16-24-year-olds. This is paid through the employer/provider system - it is not cash for you.
4. Eligible care leavers under 25 can receive a £3,000 bursary in three instalments during the first year.
5. A £2,000 hiring payment for some employers begins in October 2026. It belongs to the employer, not automatically to the apprentice.

Direct employment

Minimum rate from April 2026	Hourly	Approx. gross monthly pay at 37.5 hours/week
Apprentice / age 16-17	£8.00	£1,300
Age 18-20	£10.85	£1,763
Age 21+	£12.71	£2,065

The monthly figures are simple planning estimates before tax, National Insurance, pension and any student-loan deduction. Actual hours and pay dates matter.

Ask before you accept

[ ] What is the guaranteed base pay - not the 'up to' figure?

[ ] How many hours are guaranteed, and are shifts, overtime or commission reliable?

[ ] When is pay reviewed? What training, study time, travel, tools or exams are paid?

[ ] Are there clawback terms if you leave after employer-funded training?

[ ] What happened to the last person in this role or apprenticeship?

Find the true cost

Cost bucket	Examples	Common mistake
Learning	Tuition, books, laptop, software, tools, exams and memberships	Assuming the headline fee covers everything
Living	Rent, deposit, food, utilities, phone and household costs	Using term-time rent but forgetting summer
Access	Travel, driving, relocation, placement accommodation, childcare and accessibility costs	Ignoring the cost and time of attendance
Work	Uniform, PPE, equipment, checks, commuting and unpaid breaks	Assuming the employer pays every cost
Opportunity	Income not earned, delayed progression, time and flexibility given up	Ignoring it - or treating it as a bill due now

USE TWO TESTS

Affordability asks: can I cover each month? Long-term value asks: what could I earn, repay and gain over time? A route can pass one test and fail the other.

Build a first-year cash-flow check

1. Add guaranteed net earnings, confirmed loan instalments and confirmed grants or bursaries.
2. Subtract essential living, learning, access and work costs. Include one-off costs such as a deposit, laptop, tools or travel card.
3. Map when money arrives. A termly loan does not behave like a monthly wage.
4. Stress-test it: lower income by 10%, raise variable costs by 10%, and remove overtime, tips or part-time work for eight weeks.

Your quick budget	Route A	Route B	Route C
Total money in, year 1	£	£	£
Essential money out, year 1	£	£	£
One-off start-up costs	£	£	£
Cautious-case surplus / gap	£	£	£

Understand student loans and future income

STUDENT LOAN IS NOT A BANK LOAN

Your required deduction is mainly based on earnings above your plan threshold, not the size of your balance. Interest and the balance still matter, especially if you are likely to repay in full.

Plan	Who it commonly covers	2026-27 threshold	Deduction	Typical write-off
Plan 1	Northern Ireland and some older England/Wales loans	£26,900	9% above	Usually 25 years for later Plan 1 starts
Plan 2	England 2012-July 2023; Wales from 2012	£29,385	9% above	30 years
Plan 4	Scotland	£33,795	9% above	Usually 30 years
Plan 5	Most new England undergraduate, PGCE and LLE borrowing	£25,000	9% above	40 years
Postgraduate	England/Wales master's or doctoral loan	£21,000	6% above	30 years

Plan 5: a quick example

Gross annual pay	Income above £25,000	Estimated yearly deduction	Average per month
£25,000	£0	£0	£0
£30,000	£5,000	£450	£37.50
£35,000	£10,000	£900	£75.00
£40,000	£15,000	£1,350	£112.50

Payroll calculates by pay period and rounds under HMRC rules. An undergraduate-plan deduction and a postgraduate-loan deduction can be taken at the same time.

Research future income without fooling yourself

1. Use one precise occupation, not a broad label such as 'business' or 'creative'.
2. Use at least three sources: the National Careers Service, live local vacancies and exact course or qualification outcomes where available.
3. Create low, base and high cases for year 1 and year 5. Keep bonus, overtime and commission out of the base case unless they are reliable.
4. Write down what progression requires: experience, exams, a licence, a portfolio, security clearance or further study.

Interest rates change. From 1 September 2026, Plan 5 interest is 4.1%; Plan 2 and postgraduate rates can be higher but are capped at 6% for this period. Check the current rate before publishing or deciding.

Compare skills, career fit and quality

What develops	University / HE	Apprenticeship	Direct employment
Knowledge	Theory, evidence and depth in a subject	Occupation knowledge applied at work	Role and employer-specific knowledge
Practical skill	Projects, labs, clinics or placements - varies by course	Repeated practice in a real job	Immediate practice; quality depends on the role and coaching
Thinking	Research, analysis, writing and critique	Problem-solving under real constraints	Judgement, priorities and commercial awareness
Proof for employers	Qualification, projects, placements and network	Qualification, work history, competence and references	Results, references, portfolio and progression
Future mobility	Can be broad; supports graduate and professional routes	Strong occupational identity; employer and standard matter	Can be broad or narrow; credentials may need adding later

Which conditions help you do well?

This is not a personality test. Preferences can change, and good support can make any route more accessible. Ask what conditions you need, then test whether each real option provides them.

1. Learning: more theory and exploration, structured practice, or immediate work?
2. Support: tutor and cohort, manager and training provider, or workplace team?
3. Lifestyle: location, hours, travel, caring, disability support, social life and wellbeing?
4. Risk: course completion and borrowing, employer quality and vacancy security, or informal training and slower progression?

Quality questions and red flags

- [ ] Can they show written content, costs, hours, support and progression - not just promises?
- [ ] Can you speak to a current student, apprentice or employee?
- [ ] Does the apprenticeship job genuinely match the occupational standard?
- [ ] Does the exact course show completion, employment and earnings evidence?
- [ ] Avoid pressure to accept quickly, 'guaranteed' earnings without conditions, unpaid required training, large unexplained upfront fees or vague promotion promises.

Make the decision - and keep a backup

Score actual options only after checking the career gate and building the cautious budget.

Give each option 1-5 for every criterion. If one criterion matters much more, give it extra weight.

Decision check	University option /5	Apprenticeship option /5	Job option /5
First-year affordability			
Access to your target career			
Five-year financial position			
Skills and experience			
Quality of learning and support			
Flexibility and future mobility			
Wellbeing, location and relationships			
Risk and backup options			

Challenge the winner

1. Which single assumption makes this option win?
2. Does it still win in the cautious financial case?
3. Are you choosing the actual offer - or an ideal version of the route?
4. What would make you reconsider, and what is your backup if grades, funding or an offer do not work out?

A GOOD DECISION

Use the best evidence you can find, reflect what matters to you, keep a workable backup and be able to explain your reasoning. You do not need certainty about your whole future.

Your next three actions

[ ] Collect one missing piece of evidence: a written offer, exact cost, funding decision, salary range or progression fact.

[ ] Talk to one person already on the route and one person who will challenge your assumptions constructively.

[ ] Set a decision date and a backup action date.

PRACTICAL CHECKS

Check the facts before you commit

Rules and rates change. Use official sources, record the date you checked them and keep copies of written offers. Start with:

1. England tuition fees and fee loans, 2026-27
2. England maintenance loans and targeted support, 2026-27
3. Student-loan plans and repayments
4. HMRC student-loan deduction tables, 2026-27
5. Apprenticeship funding rules, 2026-27
6. National minimum wage rates from April 2026
7. National Careers Service career profiles
8. Find an apprenticeship
9. Discover Uni course information

If you live outside England

Student Finance Wales | Student Awards Agency Scotland | Student Finance Northern Ireland

Free help

MoneyHelper | Citizens Advice | Acas

IMPORTANT

This guide is educational information, not individual financial, legal, benefits or immigration advice. Eligibility depends on where you normally live, your course, age, circumstances and start date. Official guidance and your written offer take priority.

Hyfa Foundation | Route Choices Student Guide | Version 1.0 | Figures checked 12 August 2026