UNDERSTANDING APPRENTICESHIPS

A Student's Guide

BEN ROWLAND

Endorsements

“” *Understanding Apprenticeships* is comprehensive, authoritative and engaging – a must-read for anyone exploring their post-school options.

Lindsay Conroy, UCAS Apprenticeship National Programme Lead

“” An essential and informative guide - if you want to know about apprenticeships, figure out how apprenticeships compare with other options or to help you go about finding and succeeding in an apprenticeship then this is a book for you.

Simon Ashworth, Director of Policy, Association of Employment and Learning Providers

“” A must-read for anyone thinking about their next steps or supporting those doing so. It brings together various perspectives of apprenticeships, crammed with insight and knowledge, as well as being full of practical tips and tools.

Daniel Lally, Director of Business Engagement, Skills and Employability, Sheffield Hallam University

“” *Understanding Apprenticeships* brings great insight for anyone considering whether an apprenticeship is for them. What it is, how it works, what it feels like to do one all jump off the page. A great resource for young people, adults, parents, advisers and employers.

David Hughes CBE, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

“” A must-read for any young person considering their options for their post-school career. Apprenticeships are increasingly viewed by employers as a vital recruitment route, and this book helps explain what they are, how they work and how to figure out whether they are right for you. Frank, engaging and authoritative, I highly recommend it.

Anthony Impey, Chief Executive, Be the Business

“” At long last, thanks to the brilliant Ben Rowland, we have a why, what, and how guide on apprenticeships. Still a necessity in light of the difficulties in sourcing the right information, this book is a must read for would be apprentices, their parents and teachers. It dispels the myths, signposts where to find further information and enthuses the reader about why they might want to join the apprenticeship revolution.

Jason Holt CBE, CEO & Founder, Metaverse Learning

Section 1
Introduction

Welcome – and congratulations!

What for?

Well, for considering that an apprenticeship could be the right way for you to start your career. And you are correct – it could be a *brilliant* way for you to start a new career, perhaps even the best way. And many hundreds of thousands of other people just like you – both here in the UK and around the world – and their families and teachers, are beginning to think this too.

But it can be quite a hard decision to make, as there are lots of people who might advise you to go down another route, and they can seem so sure of themselves.

It is hard to find balanced, unbiased information about what apprenticeships are really like – 'warts and all' – and how to go about getting one. It is also hard to know which apprenticeship might be right for you.

And finally, applying for apprenticeships is also complicated – certainly a bit more complicated than applying for a place at university or a regular job.

So, this book is for you, and for people advising you.

It's here to:

- give you the full picture on apprenticeships
- help you figure out how they compare to other options and whether they are right for you
- show you how to find and succeed in an apprenticeship, should you choose that route.

A quick note: while 90% of the book applies to anyone anywhere in the UK considering doing an apprenticeship, the description of the Government apprenticeship scheme is of the English scheme only. Notes on where the content applies to England specifically are included in chapters 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 4.2 and 6.2.

1.1 The 21st century is the apprenticeship century

Why is it such a sensible option to consider an apprenticeship as the next step in your journey?

There are five main reasons to be excited about apprenticeships in the 21st century.

1. More and more employers, in all sectors and of all shapes and sizes, now love apprenticeships.
2. You can get into almost any career through an apprenticeship.
3. Governments around the world want and need apprenticeships, including here in the UK.
4. Apprenticeships might be your best route to maximising the money in your pocket.
5. Apprenticeships are driven by the economics of the 21st century.

1. The employers offering apprenticeships

More and more of the UK's best employers, from Jaguar Land Rover to BAE Systems to Sainsburys to IBM, are increasing the number of apprenticeships they offer – and, in some cases, quite dramatically. The 'Big 4' accountancy firms (Deloitte, PwC, KPMG and EY), long seen as the 'gold standard' for graduate recruitment, now recruit as many apprentices as they do individuals through their graduate schemes.

And where the big and well-known companies lead, other companies typically follow. Apprenticeships are now increasingly seen as a 'high end' option and carry more recognition and prestige than they ever have. This change has largely occurred over the last ten years, and has been significant; and it will continue to grow as those people now at the start of their careers who have done apprenticeships start to make their (rapid) way up the career ladder. I see this with those who were apprentices back in 2013 and 2014, who are now emerging as leaders in their businesses and promoting apprenticeships like mad.

You will see throughout this book case studies from different employers, from the biggest ones you have definitely heard of – such as BT and the NHS – and those you almost certainly have not.

You can read a bit more on why employers are coming to love apprenticeships more and more in Chapter 2.3.

2. The careers you can access via an apprenticeship

There is now almost no career you cannot access through an apprenticeship. There are over 600 different apprenticeship standards that you can do, from traditional 'trades' (such as plumbers, electricians and carpenters) to advanced engineering to digital and IT to medical, health and care (as of 2024 you can become a fully qualified doctor entirely through an apprenticeship) to creative industries to public sector to professional services… the list goes on and on.

There are apprenticeships at many different levels, from Level 2 all the way up to Level 7, so there is something for everyone (you can find out more information on these levels in chapter 3.5).

An apprenticeship is increasingly seen as ambitious and impressive qualification – though you may have to convince a few people along the way.

A growing number of apprenticeships (Levels 6 and 7) are now 'degree apprenticeships', meaning you can get a degree (exactly as you would get from university) while earning money and getting valuable work experience in a real job – at the same time.

Throughout this book you will find case studies of real people who have done a variety of apprenticeships, and in Chapter 6.2 you can read a bit more about the different kinds of apprenticeships available.

3. Governments want & need apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are taking off all around the world.

Some of the world's strongest economies have had apprenticeships baked into how they develop skills for decades, such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Many other countries are only now realising just what apprenticeships can do for their economies: from Australia to America, from India to Indonesia, from South Africa to Sweden,

governments are developing apprenticeship programmes as a key way to develop their economies.

There is a reason why this is the case: as economies around the world develop and change, one thing that is common to many of them is that they cannot find enough workers with the skills they need.

While governments continue to support university level education, they are increasingly concerned that university education alone is not going to provide the skilled people their economies need. As many of the employers in the case studies in this book show, university graduates do not always have the knowledge, skills and approaches that employers are looking for. And governments are listening to what employers are saying about this and investing in apprenticeship programmes as a result.

In the UK, the Government continues to invest huge amounts of time and effort in promoting apprenticeships. Every major political party in the UK supports them – so even if the Government changes through a general election, apprenticeships are not going anywhere.

You can read more about what different governments around the world are doing in Chapter 2.5, including the UK Government (and what a possible future government might do).

4. Earning power

A 2016 report, *Productivity and Lifetime Earnings of Apprentices and Graduates*, by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) on behalf of Barclays Bank, found that people getting a Level 4 apprenticeship earned as much over their lifetime as the typical graduate. Since then, the quality of apprenticeships has grown, which is likely to have improved earning prospects even further.

Two other factors need to be considered when it comes to the money:

i. If you do an apprenticeship you start your earning journey three years earlier than if you go to university; you also get three extra years of progressing up the career ladder, promotions and pay rises. It is common for someone who has done an apprenticeship that when they are three years into their career (i.e. the age they would have been leaving university if they had chosen to study for a degree instead) to be earning comfortably more than someone just starting

out as a graduate from university; and they are already on a steep upward career trajectory towards more promotions and pay rises.

ii. Doing an apprenticeship avoids the costs and subsequent debt involved with going to university – you have nothing to pay back once you have finished – a saving of thousands of pounds.

5. Apprenticeships & 21st-century economics

Apprenticeships are here to stay, not just because employers like them at the moment or because they are popular with governments right now. They are here to stay because they are the best logical response to the needs of the 21st-century global economy.

That's because the 21st-century economy is beginning to look very different from the 20th-century economy – it is beginning to look like an Apprenticeship Economy: one in which rapidly changing skills requirements call for shorter, more nimble, hands-on practical training and education, and employees who are fully adapted to this way of acquiring productivity for their employers.

There are a number of reasons why the economy is changing so quickly.

First, the pace of technology-driven change has never been as fast – and it's getting faster. Technological change is not new and has been disrupting how we live for centuries: the arrival of the printing press in the 15th century changed everything back then, and the invention of the steam engine was the spark for the UK's industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries.

But technological change has never moved more quickly than now. We can see this by comparing how long it took key technology breakthroughs to reach 100 million users.

- Colour TV: launched in the mid-1950s, took **25 years** to reach 100 million users.
- Microsoft Windows: launched in the mid-1980s, took **15 years** to reach the 100 million mark.
- Spotify: launched in 2006, took **four years** to reach the same number.
- Instagram: launched in 2010, took **two years** to reach that milestone.

- TikTok: launched in 2016, took **nine months**.
- ChatGPT: launched in early 2023, took just **two months** to reach 100 million users.

Second, not much is certain any more. Politics is as unpredictable as it has been for a long time. That's true here in the UK (where we have had as many Prime Ministers since 2016 as we had in the 36 years between 1979 and 2015!) and also in other countries. China and Russia are not on the paths to Western democracy that we thought they were. This political uncertainty means we can no longer rely on assumptions about how the world will be in five years' time, let alone 20 years.

Third, the physical world we live in is under pressure like never before: while scientists and (most) politicians agree that climate change is happening, we don't know exactly how it will change things. We recently learned that a new virus can literally shut the world down – and who knows if and when the next one will be on the way?

Fourth, more optimistically, there are potentially huge positive breakthroughs on the way that will change our lives forever. For example, nuclear fusion (which would enable almost free, limitless energy) is getting closer – maybe; and new materials technology with new substances such as graphene and lignin could change what we can create and how, for the better.

Fifth, the world of work itself is changing. Employee expectations are changing fast: gone are the days of dutifully turning up to work every day at 9am and doing whatever your boss told you until it was time to clock off at 5pm. Employees now expect that their work will be meaningful and enjoyable, with opportunities to influence management, and are also looking for a flexible approach when it comes to the hours and the location of their work.

All of these huge changes and uncertainties mean that jobs are changing fast. This, in turn, means employers are constantly having to update the jobs they employ people for. But they face a huge battle in finding people with the necessary skills for these new jobs – because the skills are so new, very few people have them. So they now realise that to cope with the 21st-century economy they have to 'grow their own' and develop people to learn the skills they need; they cannot rely on others – like schools and universities – to do this for them.

Twenty-first-century employers want to hire people who may not yet have the skills they need, but who are willing and able to learn them. They want employees who are action-orientated and who like getting things done. They want to take these people – the raw material – and train and shape them.

This is, in fact, a description of exactly what apprenticeships do. And that is why apprenticeships are made for the 21st century.

This is amazing news for anyone who comes from a 'non-traditional' background or who has a disability or health issue. Twenty years ago, and maybe even ten years ago, to get a job in any organisation it definitely helped if you 'looked' and 'behaved' in the same way as the people who already worked there; but the shortage of skills around the world is making companies challenge their biases head-on, in order that they can hire the skilled people they need, regardless of what they look or sound like.

So that's why I started by saying 'Well done', because considering an apprenticeship is a very smart thing to do if you want to set yourself up for a successful career in the 21st century.

1.2 A bit more on this guidebook and how to use it

The purpose of this book is to give you information on and insights about apprenticeships as an option for starting your career in a way that means you feel you can make a decision you are happy with.

There is, of course, tons of information out there on the internet. Search 'Should I do an apprenticeship?' on Google, TikTok or any other platform and you will get thousands of results. However, quantity doesn't always mean quality. The information you find typically falls into one of three categories.

i. Worthy but dull technical content often produced by the government or other 'official' organisations. It may be accurate, but is unlikely to address the real questions you may have or do so in a way that you actually want to read.
ii. Promotion of apprenticeships as the best thing since sliced bread. Normally this is from organisations that stand to gain from more people taking up apprenticeships; this information is typically more engaging and inspiring, but is often not objective, and may skim over the downsides that you need to know about.
iii. Inspirational case studies and testimonials from 'superstar' award-winning apprentices. These stories can really bring apprenticeships alive and are directly from people like you, but by definition they are not typical stories. They rarely explain the nuts and bolts of how an apprenticeship works, or answer the question of 'How can this work for me?'.

It is hard to find structured, independent but also engaging advice and guidance that makes sense. Therefore, the intention of this book is threefold.

i. To give you enough insight and knowledge, combined with some tips, tools and techniques, for you to be able to figure out with a reasonable degree of confidence whether an apprenticeship is right for you.

ii. If you do decide that an apprenticeship is the right route for you, to help you figure out which ones to go for and how to best go about getting the one you want.

iii. To equip you with talking points so that you can have even more productive conversations with those advising you: friends, parents, teachers and careers advisors.

It is absolutely NOT a book designed to 'persuade' you to do an apprenticeship.

There are good reasons for doing an apprenticeship; and there are reasons to be cautious about doing an apprenticeship. There are good reasons for pursuing other options, like uni or a year out; and, likewise, there are reasons to be cautious about them as well. This book looks at all of the options as objectively as possible.

You may want to know what qualifies me to write this book. There are four things that are probably relevant.

i. I have made many different choices around my career: I took a year out after school to travel and see the world (well, Africa at least); I went to university (two of them in fact); I have been on dozens of corporate training programmes, from the terrible to the life-changing; and more recently I trained and qualified in a totally new vocational career (as a personal trainer).

ii. I set up and ran an apprenticeship programme that worked with employers large and small, famous (Google, Barclays Bank, John Lewis & Partners) and not-so-famous. This programme evolved into one of the biggest apprenticeship programmes in the UK. This means I have seen with my own eyes how apprenticeships (really) work – and what happens when they go wrong. I have also undertaken lots of further research on apprenticeships while writing this book.

iii. I have employed apprentices and seen first-hand what they can do, and what enables an apprentice to succeed.

iv. I have two teenage children myself (at the time of writing), who are 13 and 16. The advice and information in this book are the advice and information I give to them.

This guidebook has ten sections that take you through the key aspects of apprenticeships.

Section 1. **Introduction**: Welcome to the apprenticeship century.

Section 2. **The Power of Apprenticeships**: how they deliver value and why lots of different people are seeing their value more and more.

Section 3. **What an apprenticeship entails**: the components, End Point Assessment, different levels, functional skills, who's involved, financial implications, things to beware of.

Section 4. **What you need to know about university and other options**: the benefits of university, things to think about, managing pro-university bias.

Section 5. **Deciding whether to do an apprenticeship**: your timing and circumstances, your attributes, evaluating apprenticeships for you (your aspirations, strengths, etc.).

Section 6. **Finding a good apprenticeship to apply for**: location, which apprenticeships (occupation, sector, type of employer), managing your applications, finding apprenticeships online and offline, evaluating employers and providers.

Section 7. **Getting a great apprenticeship**: establishing your story, navigating the application process, assessing the offer, responding appropriately.

Section 8. **Apprenticeships are for everyone**: additional advice for people with extra (perceived) challenges (minority ethnic community, disability, neurodivergence, mental health issues, NEET, those who are care-experienced).

Section 9. **Conclusion**

Section 10. **Useful resources**: a list of organisations and sources of information that can be helpful to you.

Between each section there are two case studies, one from an apprentice and one from an employer. The **Apprentice Case Studies** are from people who completed their apprenticeship up to ten years ago, so you can see what they have gone on to do. I have focused these case studies on 'normal' apprentices – not award winners or 'superstars' – because it is the more normal experiences that are likely to be more relevant to you. There are also five bonus apprentice case studies available online at indigo.careers.

Throughout this book there are **Interesting ideas** – things for you to consider, and which may add to your decision-making process.

This book is here to help you make the right decision for yourself. Not by persuading you or even showing you, but by giving you the structure and questions to come to the right conclusion for you, whether that is doing an apprenticeship now, later or not at all.

You should use this book in whatever way helps you most. Here is one suggested way to use this book.

- Have a look at the chapter headings to see what is covered and how it flows
- Allow yourself a sneak preview of those chapters that you are most interested in
- Then read the whole book through, quite quickly – though don't worry about skipping the chapters that don't grab your attention (you can always come back to them)
- Re-read those chapters that you find most useful and interesting
- Download the tools that are available online at **indigo.careers/understanding_apprenticeships** and start to use them
- Then keep the book on your desk or by your bed so you can dip back into it whenever you want.

I've kept the chapters deliberately short, so if you only have a few spare minutes you can still read a chunk of something useful.

Interesting idea: Unhelpful helpful people

There are likely to be lots of people who will have an opinion on what you should do after you leave education, and – because 99% of human beings are quite nice – they probably want to help you: they want to be helpful. This might include your teachers, your parents, relatives or a family friend.

But however helpful they want to be, they will not necessarily know much about the things that matter right now for your choices: about the jobs market, about careers, about modern employers, or even that much about you and what your real strengths and preferences are.

They may well be looking at your choices as though they were 'their' choices when they were your age and reliving them (especially if they regret their choices, or perhaps that they did not have the choices you have).

So while they may be well-meaning, it is also possible that they may be unintentionally *unhelpful*.

Be gracious and polite when people do offer you advice, but don't fall into the trap of thinking that you *have* to listen to them. And it doesn't matter if they are insistent with their views – if their advice doesn't feel right, then trust your instincts. So, as much as they are insistent with their advice, feel free to be equally as insistent in saying 'Thanks, but no thanks'.

Make sure you speak to a careers advisor, who is professionally trained and should be impartial.

Remember the decision should always be yours. After all, you will live with the decision you make – whoever is advising you won't!

Section 1 summary: Introduction

Apprenticeships are an exciting and important option – you have done well to consider them.

- Great employers are embracing apprenticeships.
- You can now access almost any career via an apprenticeship.
- Governments around the world are committed to supporting apprenticeships.
- Doing an apprenticeship is highly likely to boost your earning power.
- Apprenticeships fit the needs of the fast changing economy of the 21st century.

This guidebook is here to help you understand apprenticeships, whether they might be right for you and how you go about getting them. Crucially, it will equip you for the discussions you are likely to have with family, friends and teachers who are advising you (remember: there may be people who want to be helpful but, because they do not have the latest information, may be less helpful than they hope).

Use this book in whatever way you want, and keep coming back to dip into the parts that feel most relevant and useful to you.

APPRENTICE CASE STUDY: JANELLE RAPHANAHANE

Janelle really didn't know what she wanted to do as she came to the end of school. She was pretty sure she didn't want to go to university, which would involve moving out of home, incurring debt and relying on her mum's financial support – particularly as she doesn't even like studying!

Being nagged by her mum, she researched options and signed up to webinars. Having figured out that she wanted an office career, she began to home in on finance apprenticeships – after all, she liked numbers and maths. Janelle then specifically researched finance apprenticeships and identified just one that sounded what she was looking for, with Grant Thornton.

'I really went for it, doing as much research as I could on the company and the programme. The assessment process was tough, with interviews (some of which were awkward self-filmed answers) and assignments, but I felt prepared. I also made contact via LinkedIn with one of the firm's partners, which really boosted my confidence and my sense that I could belong there.'

And it worked out: Janelle received an unconditional offer for the apprenticeship before her friends had even completed their UCAS forms. She was able to relax and fully enjoy her last year at school – and to her pleasant surprise, she got 3 Bs at A level.

She is now six months into her Accountancy Apprenticeship, specialising in Audit. It is a five-year Level 7 scheme, and she will be a fully qualified Accountant at the end of it. She will not have paid any fees and will have earned (very well) for all of those five years. Whatever she wants to do next – carry on, take a year out to travel, or even move career – she will be extremely well placed.

'No one had told me about apprenticeships before. The way you learn in an apprenticeship suits me: I have learned bit by bit through experience, and can now really feel that I am getting on top of the work and am able to contribute at meetings – it's really exciting. I love going to visit clients as we work with some really cool companies, including a gaming company and one who provides technical services to one of the world's biggest entertainment organisations.'

Janelle says how exciting – and a bit scary – it was to join the world of work straight from school. 'I thought the working day finished at 4.30pm – they were very nice in the way they told me it was, in fact, 5.30pm!' She also says how helpful and fun it is to be on a programme with other people who are a similar age and just starting out, with lots of social events and perks.

One piece of advice she is keen to pass on: 'There is a lot to do in an apprenticeship: your work AND your studies. You have to get good at time management!'

She says that A levels and getting to uni really are not the only option. 'Don't feel you need to do what your teachers tell you – do your own homework. I've got friends at good universities also studying accountancy. One has dropped out already and is looking for an apprenticeship, and another comes to me for advice on the technical content of accountancy, even though they're the ones doing the degree. I also get to go and visit them and enjoy the social life. I'm really not missing out. I'm so glad I made the choice I did and went for it.'

EMPLOYER CASE STUDY: ARC GROUP LONDON

Arc Group London is a SME (small- and medium-sized enterprise) within the construction industry made up of various divisions such as: waterproofing, M&E (mechanical and electrical), fire compliance, property services (e.g. fitting kitchens and bathrooms) and more large-scale capital projects such as extensions and refurbishment works to schools and public buildings.

They offer apprenticeships at all levels, from Levels 2 and 3 in trade occupations such as electrics, plumbing, roofing and carpentry all the way up to degree apprenticeships in Quantity Surveying, Business Management and Design & Build. Some 18% of their team are apprentices – a significant proportion that demonstrates just how valuable apprenticeships are for them.

'There is a massive shortage of skills in our industry. As a business we understand how vital apprenticeships are to address this. Without our apprentices we wouldn't be able to grow as a business.'

So says Amy Packer, the company's Social Value Manager, responsible for helping Arc fulfil its requirements to add value to the local communities in which it works, which includes managing their apprenticeship programme. It's no surprise that Amy is an enthusiast – she began her career as an apprentice herself (doing business administration) within the construction industry. She worked her way up through different divisions within construction and eventually found her current role: she is living proof of how apprenticeships can take you from being a school leaver to an influential member of management within nine years.

She notes that apprenticeships are a great way for people to develop their skills, because the learning and qualification part of an apprenticeship validates and reinforces how the person is growing professionally – something that might otherwise get lost. 'Often people don't realise that what they are doing in the workplace is as important as it is; the apprenticeship allows them to fully understand their role, while also preparing them for the role they are going to

move into next. The fact that they can ask questions, there and then, from their colleagues and peers, means that their learning is in real time and completely relevant.'

On top of that, she points out, you don't have university fees to cover and are gaining experience in the world of work.

Her advice to those thinking about whether they are right for an apprenticeship is clear: 'You need to have commitment and personal drive. You need to be able to motivate yourself for the studying side of the apprenticeship as well as the work side, which means you need to enjoy what you are doing.'

She also has useful advice on how to maximise your chances of success in an apprenticeship: 'Don't be shy about asking questions! Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you shouldn't "bother" senior people who you think might be "too busy" – the job of a manager IS to help develop people starting out, and they love to be asked questions and to help, not least because it allows them to validate their own experience and to share their knowledge and experience.'