

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

A GUIDE TO MAKING INFORMED CHOICES
ABOUT YOUR CAREER

DIDN'T GET
THE GCSE/A LEVEL
RESULTS YOU
WANTED?

ARE DEGREES
THE BEST
OPTION?

IS THIS DEGREE
RIGHT FOR ME?

NOT SURE
WHAT A LEVELS
TO PICK?

THIS GUIDE WILL:

- EXPLORE DIFFERENT CAREER AVENUES
- PROVIDE SOLUTION BASED ADVICE
- TACKLE MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS
- DISCUSS APPRENTICESHIPS, NVQ'S AND DEGREES





**UJALA FOUNDATION
CAREER GUIDANCE BOOKLET
FOR AGES 13 - 18**

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	The Main Post-16 Routes	4
3.	Money, Debt And Pay	10
4.	Job Security And Progression	11
5.	Steps To Take... Now	12
6.	Concluding Remarks	16
7.	References	17
8.	About The Authors	18

1. INTRODUCTION

So, you're in Year 10 - 13 and probably getting bombarded with questions like "*What are you doing after school?*" or "*Have you thought about uni?*" Yeah, we know - it can feel overwhelming. That's where this guide comes in. Think of it as a cheat sheet for your future. We'll break down your Post-16 options, help you figure out what might actually suit you, and point out the stuff worth thinking about before you make big choices.

We wrote this because we've seen loads of young people stressing about their futures, not sure which way to go. Between us, we've got years of uni and career guidance experience, and we've collected the most useful advice to share with you (and your parents). Here's the deal: uni isn't the only way forward. Do you really need a degree to succeed? Nope, not always. Didn't get the GCSE or A level results you were aiming for? That doesn't mean game over. Still confused about what subjects to pick, or what comes next? Totally normal.

This guide is all about giving you straight-up answers, busting myths, and helping you climb the "career ladder" without slipping on the way up. Take it steady, keep an open mind, and use this guide to stay on track. Your future, your call.

Let's take a quick look at the different qualification levels - this will make it easier to follow along with what we'll cover next.

Level	Qualification Examples	What It Means
Entry Level	Entry Level Certificate, Functional Skills (basic)	Very basic knowledge and skills – foundation for further study.
Level 1	GCSEs (grades D–G / 3–1), NVQ Level 1, Foundation Diploma	Introductory level – builds practical and academic skills.
Level 2	GCSEs (grades A*–C / 9–4), NVQ Level 2, BTEC Firsts	Equivalent to good secondary school achievement – basic work-ready skills.
Level 3	A Levels, NVQ Level 3, BTEC Nationals, T Levels	Equivalent to post-16 qualifications – prepares for higher education or skilled employment.
Level 4	Higher National Certificate (HNC), NVQ Level 4, Certificate of Higher Education	First level of higher education – specialist knowledge and skills.
Level 5	Higher National Diploma (HND), Foundation Degree, NVQ Level 5	Equivalent to 2 years of university – deeper knowledge and practical expertise.
Level 6	Bachelor's Degree, Graduate Certificate/Diploma, NVQ Level 6	Full undergraduate level – advanced study in a subject.

Level	Qualification Examples	What It Means
Level 7	Master's Degree, Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma, NVQ Level 7	Postgraduate level – highly developed specialist knowledge.
Level 8	Doctorate (PhD/Professional Doctorate), NVQ Level 8	Highest academic level – original research or advanced professional practice.

2. THE MAIN POST-16 ROUTES

From around age 13, it's helpful to explore your interests actively. Think about hobbies, family influences, or skills you excel at - these can indicate potential career paths. Ask yourself: What do I enjoy? What am I good at? Where do I see myself in 10 years, and beyond? While you're free to change paths, reflecting on these questions helps identify careers that suit your strengths and character. Next, let's look at an overview of post-16 options...

Full time education

If you choose to continue in full-time education, you could pursue academic subjects, practical knowledge-based courses, or technical and vocational studies. Some careers require specific qualifications, so **it's important to research the options you're interested in** and understand the paths they can lead to.

Your full-time education options include:

- A levels [1] which you can do at sixth form college, further education college or a University Technical College
- National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) [2] which you can do at college, school, or a workplace.
- T Levels [3] which you can do at a further education college/

Starting an apprenticeship

Apprenticeships are real jobs which combine work with training

and study. You can apply for an apprenticeship whilst you're still at school. You'll earn a wage, gain a qualification and experience and can put what you learn into practice. In some cases, you may be offered a job at the end of your apprenticeship.

2.1 Full time education

2.1.1 A levels

What: Subject-based, exam-heavy; strong route to university or higher/degree apprenticeships.

Apply: Via school/college enrolment after GCSEs.

Advice: To decide which subjects to take at A level, you should consider which subjects:

- you're good at or you would enjoy
- you might need for a certain job or further study after A levels
- will help you keep your options open if you're not sure what you want to do in the future

Entry requirements: Normally 5 GCSEs at grades 9 to 4, grade 6 in the subjects you want to study but confirm this with the school/college.

2.1.2 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ)

What: It's a work-based qualification that shows you can do a job to the required industry standard. They're designed to prove competence, not just knowledge.

Apply: NVQs can be based in a college, school, or a workplace.

Assessment: NVQs are based on real tasks at work. You're assessed by providing evidence (e.g. photos, logs, supervisor reports, practical assessments) while you're actually doing the job.

Key things to know:

- Now mostly delivered as part of apprenticeships, which include NVQs plus extra training.
- Can also be taken alone by people already working, to prove skills for career progression or schemes (e.g., CSCS in construction).
- Widely valued by employers because they are competence-based.

Examples of NVQs

Trades & Construction: NVQ Level 2 in Plumbing & Heating, NVQ Level 3 in Electrical Installation, NVQ Level 2 in Bricklaying, NVQ Level 2 in Carpentry & Joinery.

Health & Care: NVQ Level 2 in Health & Social Care (often now replaced by Diploma in Care), NVQ Level 3 in Children's Care, Learning & Development.

Business & Services: NVQ Level 2 in Customer Service, NVQ Level 3 in Business Administration, NVQ Level 2 in Hairdressing.

2.1.3 T Levels

T Level	80% classroom	20% industry placement
Apprenticeship	20% classroom	80% employment
A Level	100% classroom	

A T Level takes 2 years and gives you a mix of learning in the classroom and a minimum 9 week placement with an employer. This means you'll learn what a real career is like while you study.

What: Level 3. 2-year technical programme. 80% classroom + 20% industry placement (~315 hours). Designed with employers; carry UCAS tariff points like A levels (overall T Level grade converts to UCAS points).

HOW MANY UCAS TARIFF POINTS DOES A T LEVEL HAVE?

- ↗ 168 Distinction
- ↗ 144 Distinction
- ↗ 120 Merit
- ↗ 96 Pass (C or above on the core)
- ↗ 72 Pass (D or E on the core)

WHAT ARE THE ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR A T LEVEL?

5 GCSEs at grade 4 or above to include English and Maths. If you don't meet the entry requirements for a T Level then you can study a T Level Foundation Year

Good prep for skilled work, higher/degree apprenticeships, or university.

Apply: Through local colleges/sixth forms offering your T Level of interest (check provider websites and deadlines).

2.2 Apprenticeships

What: Paid jobs with training. You work for an employer, get paid, and study towards an approved standard (can be anything from Level 2 up to a Bachelor's/Master's degree) [4]. Vacancies exist across hundreds of occupations.

Good for: Students who learn best by doing, want to earn, and like a direct line into a job.

Pay: You must be paid at least the apprentice minimum wage (many pay more). From 1 April 2025, the apprentice rate is £7.55/hour (16 - 17 and first year). 18 - 20: £10.00; 21+: £12.21. Employers often pay above these minimums.

Cost: No tuition fees; training costs are funded by the employer/government.

Progression: Can step up through higher levels, or convert to permanent roles. Degree apprenticeships lead to the same degree title as full-time university routes.

How to apply:

- Search and apply on “Find an apprenticeship”. You can also find degree apprenticeships via UCAS. Applications run all year—treat them like jobs and apply early.
- **Where to look:** Find an apprenticeship (gov.uk) [5].

2.3 Degrees

What: University study (3–4 years for most Bachelor’s).

How to apply (2026 entry timeline):

- 2 Sept 2025: you can submit applications.
- 15 Oct 2025: early deadline for Oxford/Cambridge and most Medicine/Dentistry/Vet.
- Main 2026 deadlines are listed on UCAS key-dates pages - always check the live page as dates are specific. [6]
- Personal statement change: For 2026 entry, UCAS replaces the single essay with three questions about motivation, academic prep, and activities beyond class. [7]

FAQs: *Will I earn more if I have a degree?* Yes, on average people with a degree earn more, as a degree gives you more job prospects and allows you to progress quicker. This is not always the case, but on average graduates do earn more. *Do I need a degree for every career?* No. Some careers require degrees (e.g., medicine, law, teaching), but many others value vocational training, apprenticeships, or work experience just as much. Research your chosen field before committing.

3. MONEY, DEBT AND PAY

The choice you make after school or college often depends on your personal circumstances. Ask yourself: Do you want to start earning and gaining work experience straight away, or can you commit to university and delay full-time work for 3–4 years while you study? Both routes have advantages, and the right decision depends on your goals, finances, and interests. Below, we'll outline some key considerations for the different options available to you.

University (Plan 5 loans, England):

Tuition is typically up to £9,250/yr. Plan 5 loans (for new starters from 2023) repay at 9% of income over £25,000, charge interest at RPI only, and cancel after 40 years. (RPI set at 3.2% for Sept 2025–Aug 2026.) Maintenance support is means-tested. Consider bursaries/scholarships too.

Apprenticeships:

You earn while learning (at least the legal minimum; many pay more), no tuition fees, and still access student discounts at many providers. Factor travel costs and the pace of working + studying.

T Levels / BTECs / A levels:

Usually no tuition fees at 16–18 in state providers; you won't be paid, but you can take part-time work. Check for bursaries or free-courses lists for specific levels/sectors.

Tip: To compare real jobs' starting pay and progression, use the National Careers Service job profiles (each shows typical salary bands, hours, entry routes, and progression) [8].

4. JOB SECURITY AND PROGRESSION

It's important to choose a career that offers clear progression and job security, where the skills you've developed - both academic and practical - make you versatile and able to transfer your expertise across different roles and sectors. Below are some tips of how you can get an idea now on the progression opportunities within a career/job and prospects for the future.

- Check job profiles for “progression opportunities” and “future prospects.” (e.g., Electrician, Social Worker, Biologist, Airline Pilot) [8].
- Look at the Occupational Maps (Digital, Construction, Health, etc.) to see how qualifications connect to jobs [9].
- Prioritise employer-approved or IfATE/Skills England standards (the backbone for apprenticeships, T Levels, and HTQs) [10].

Questions you should ask yourself: *Is this industry growing?* (Check if demand for jobs is increasing or shrinking). *Does this career have clear progression routes?* (Are there opportunities for promotions, training, or higher qualifications?) *Are the skills I'll learn transferable?* (Could I use them in other jobs or sectors if needed?) *Will this job still be relevant in 10–20 years?* (Is it future-proof against automation or major industry changes?) *Does this career match my interests and strengths?* (Am I likely to stay motivated and committed long term?)

5. STEPS TO TAKE... NOW

Ages 13 - 14 (Years 9 - 10)

1. Explore interests: pick 3 careers and read the job profiles (entry routes, salary, hours, progression). Keep notes. [8]
2. Build basics: focus on English & Maths—they're gateways for nearly every route.
3. Get exposure: clubs, online taster courses, volunteering.
4. Talk to someone: use the National Careers Service helpline if you're unsure where to start. Speak to teachers, professionals. **Be inquisitive!**

Ages 15–16 (Year 11 / post-GCSE decisions)

1. Decide your route(s) to try at 16: A levels, T Levels, NVQ/ other vocational, or Apprenticeship.
2. Shortlist providers and visit (open days). Ask about work experience, employer links, success rates, and destinations.
3. If leaning toward apprenticeships, create a Find an apprenticeship account and set alerts. Practice CV + cover letter [5].
4. If choosing T Levels or college courses, apply via provider sites - check entry requirements and deadlines.

Ages 16–17 (Year 12)

1. Firm up a pathway: compare degree vs degree apprenticeship vs HTQ for your field.
2. Experience matters: secure a placement/part-time role or

virtual work experience; reflect on what you learned.

3. If aiming for university, start UCAS Hub; draft answers for the three personal-statement questions. Collect evidence for each question.
4. If aiming for apprenticeships, apply rolling (treat like jobs: tailor your CV, prepare for online tests/assessment centres).

Ages 17–18 (Year 13)

1. UCAS: submit from 2 Sept 2025 (earlier deadlines for Oxbridge/Medicine/Dentistry/Vet: 15 Oct 2025). Track replies and meet decision deadlines.
2. Apprenticeships: keep applying in parallel—many top schemes open Sept–Jan but can appear any time.
3. Prepare financially: if going to uni, read Student Loans: terms & conditions and check bursaries/grants. If going apprenticeship, compare pay vs travel/living costs and minimum wage.
4. Use National Careers Service for interview prep and local labour-market insight.

Quick Route Comparison

The table below highlights the main advantages and challenges of each career pathway. Use it as a guide to help you decide your next steps.

Route	Big wins	Watch-outs	Immediate next steps
Apprenticeship (L2–7)	Paid job + training; no tuition; direct employer network	Competitive; fixed hours; less timetable flexibility	Create Find an apprenticeship account; draft CV & cover letter; set alerts; apply widely.
T Level (L3)	Long industry placement; UCAS points; clear line into work/apprenticeship/uni	Heavier workload than many expect; fewer subject choices than A levels	Identify local providers and placements; check UCAS tariff for your T Level; apply via provider.
BTEC/Other L3 Vocational	Applied learning; widely accepted for many degrees	Some courses defunded from Aug 2025 (check availability)	Confirm your course is funded/running for your start year.
A levels (L3)	Broad choice; ideal for academic/undecided students	Less direct workplace exposure	Pick subjects aligned to target degrees/apprenticeships; plan work experience.

Route	Big wins	Watch-outs	Immediate next steps
HTQ (L4–5)	Employer-approved; shorter; practical	Not every subject/location has options yet	Search HTQs by sector/provider; plan top-up pathway.
Degree (L6)	Deep subject study; huge provider choice	Loans; repayment over time (Plan 5)	Start UCAS Hub, prep 3 UCAS questions; check key dates.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dealing with Parent Pressure: Conflicts at home, especially around results day, are common. Remember, your parents want the best for you - they want to see you succeed and reach your full potential. Tension can arise if you haven't yet explored your own interests, leaving them to make decisions on your behalf. Involve your family in exploring career paths that align with your passions while also considering practical factors like job security and growth opportunities. Keep in mind that your parents have observed your growth over the years and understand some of your strengths and interests. When you take charge of your career choices and are well-informed, your parents will trust your decisions. Collaborate and value their guidance - it's invaluable.

Develop a Culture of Hard Work: Grades alone don't define you - your attitude matters far more. Long-term success comes from dedication, initiative, and consistent effort. Laziness may offer temporary relief, but it ultimately leads to setbacks, while sustained hard work pays off over time.

Give Back to Your Community: As you achieve career success, stay connected to your roots. Use your skills, knowledge, and experience to uplift your local community. For example, doctors can organise health awareness initiatives, while fitness professionals or coaches can offer workshops and guidance to improve community wellness.

7. REFERENCES

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8. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Hussain Mahmood, born and raised in Slough, attended The Godolphin Junior Academy until 2004 before moving on to Burnham Grammar School, where he achieved 8 A*s and 4 As at GCSE, followed by A*AA in Chemistry, Biology, and Psychology at A-level.

He began studying Medicine at The University of Manchester in 2012, also completing a BSc in Global Health. Since then, he has gained further qualifications, including a PGCE in Medical Education, a diploma in the Philosophy of Medicine, and membership of the Royal College of Physicians.

Alongside his academic and professional achievements, Dr Mahmood is deeply involved in voluntary work. He serves as South East Lead for AskMyDoc, a non-profit improving health outcomes for ethnic minorities, and leads Health Awareness at Slough Youth Action, where he has delivered knife crime workshops in schools and colleges. He is also Public Health Lead at Ujala Foundation, delivering community health initiatives.

Professionally, Dr Mahmood has a special interest in Palliative Care and is currently focused on raising awareness around death and bereavement in the Muslim community. His efforts in highlighting the dangers of nitrous oxide misuse have gained media attention, and he remains active in addressing key social and health issues within the community.

Humza Mahmood, born in Slough, attended The Godolphin Junior Academy until 2008 before moving to Slough and Eton School, where he achieved 4 A*s and 8 As at GCSE. He went on to Herschel Grammar School, earning A-levels in Product Design, Maths, and Physics (BBC).

In 2015, he began studying Materials Science & Engineering at the University of Manchester, graduating with a First-Class Master's in Engineering (MEng). His outstanding performance earned him the Highly Commended RH Craven Award 2020 from the Institute of Materials, Minerals & Mining.

His Master's research on nanocomposites led to a publication in a high-impact journal. In the same year, he competed in the inaugural Graphene Hackathon at the Graphene Engineering Innovation Centre, leading a 24-hour project on graphene commercialisation judged by Nobel laureate Konstantin Novoselov.

Humza is completing his Engineering Doctorate (EngD) in Aerospace Engineering at the University of Bristol, where his research applies machine learning to predict carbon fibre preform quality in composite manufacturing. Beyond academia, he serves as Youth and Education Lead at Ujala Foundation and as Community Engagement Lead for Slough Youth Action, formally representing the voices of local youth to Slough Borough Council and other relevant partners and organisations.

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