FINANCE AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES CAREERS

After GCSEs and A-levels, **what are the real options?**

University, degree apprenticeship, school leaver programme. What each one really involves, what it pays, and when the applications actually open.

WRITTEN FOR	Parents of students in Years 11 to 13
COVERS	The three routes, the pay, the competition and the calendar
SOURCES	Every number is sourced. Where a figure is not public, we say so.

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CHAPTER 01

Why this guide exists

If you are reading this, you probably want to help and are not sure how. That is the normal position, not a failing. The system your child is applying into has changed considerably since most of us left school.

Three things have changed at once.

01 **The number of routes has grown.**
A degree apprenticeship did not exist as a mainstream option fifteen years ago. Today a school leaver can be employed by a major bank, studying for a degree, and paid a salary from their first day, with no tuition debt.

02 **The timings have moved much earlier.**
Several of the applications that matter most open in Year 12, and some close before Christmas of Year 13. Most families hear about them roughly a year after the point they needed to act.

03 **Grades have stopped being the deciding factor.**
They open the door. What happens after that is decided by things schools do not usually teach: how a student talks about themselves, how they write an application that survives an automated screen, how they handle an interview.

FROM OUR HEAD OF ADVISORY

> “ London School of Economics, then Global Markets sales at a leading global investment bank, with no family contacts in the industry. Good grades are not enough on their own. The talent is already there. The information is not. onDesk exists to close that gap.

What this guide will and will not do

IT WILL

Tell you what the routes are, what they pay, when they open, and what actually decides who gets in. Every number in it is sourced, and where a figure is not publicly available, this guide says so rather than estimating.

IT WILL NOT

Tell you which route is right for your child. Nobody can do that from the outside. What it can do is make sure the choice is made with the full picture rather than a partial one.

CHAPTER 02

The three routes

Almost every student leaving sixth form for a career in finance or professional services takes one of three routes. Most families only hear about the first.

01 University, then a graduate scheme

The familiar path. Three years of a degree, then applications to graduate schemes in the final year. The important detail most families miss is that the serious work does not start in the final year. Students who get graduate offers at the major banks have usually done a spring week in first year and a summer internship in second year, and the internship is often what converts into the job.

> If your child is going to university, the applications that matter begin in the first few weeks of their first term, not in their final year.

02 Degree apprenticeship

The student is employed by the firm from day one, paid a salary, and studies for a degree alongside the job, usually with a partner university. There is no UCAS form and no tuition debt.

FIRM	PARTNER UNIVERSITY	PROGRAMME
J.P. Morgan	University of Exeter	Awards a BSc in Applied Finance and Banking
Goldman Sachs	Queen Mary University of London, and Warwick in Birmingham	Degree apprenticeships in FICC, Equities and Engineering
HSBC	Exeter	A 50-month programme
Barclays	Not stated	Higher and degree apprenticeships across business banking, technology, risk and compliance

These are not a fallback for students who did not get the grades. Entry is competitive and often more so than the equivalent university course, because the firm is hiring an employee, not admitting a student.

03 School leaver programme

Similar in shape but not always carrying a degree. Citi, for example, runs early career apprenticeships in London and Belfast, but its own materials describe the London programme as an 18 to 22 month professional qualification rather than a degree. The distinction matters, so check what qualification a programme actually awards before your child commits several years to it.

The three routes at a glance

	UNIVERSITY, THEN GRADUATE SCHEME	DEGREE APPRENTICESHIP	SCHOOL LEAVER PROGRAMME
SHAPE	Three years of a degree, then graduate scheme applications in the final year	Employed from day one, studying for a degree alongside the job, usually with a partner university	Similar in shape, but not always carrying a degree
PAY AND COST	Tuition fee cap £9,790 a year in England, 2026/27	Paid a salary from day one, with no tuition debt. Barclays publishes £25,200 for year one	Citi describes pay only as "competitive"
QUALIFICATION	Degree	Degree, for example a BSc in Applied Finance and Banking (J.P. Morgan with Exeter)	Varies. Citi's London programme is an 18 to 22 month professional qualification
THE STEP THAT MATTERS	A spring week in first year and a summer internship in second year	The application itself, often in Year 13 alongside UCAS	Checking what the programme actually awards
WORTH KNOWING	The applications that matter begin in the first few weeks of first term	Entry is often more competitive than the equivalent university course	Citi runs early career apprenticeships in London and Belfast

SOURCE Chapters 2, 3 and 5 of this guide.

A NOTE ON YEAR 11

If your child is in Year 11, none of these applications are open to them yet. But A-level choices made this year can quietly close doors: some degree apprenticeships and most finance-related degrees expect strong maths. It is worth knowing that before the options form goes in.

THE ROAD, YEAR BY YEAR

From Year 12 to the first job

What typically opens when, on one spread. Every date and figure here is taken from the chapters of this guide.

Year 11

BEFORE ANYTHING OPENS

Choose A-levels with the doors in mind

None of these applications are open yet. Some degree apprenticeships and most finance-related degrees expect strong maths.

PAGE 5

Year 12

EARLIER THAN MOST THINK

The first applications that matter open

Several of the applications that matter most open in Year 12. Most families hear about them roughly a year after the point they needed to act. A single conversation with the school careers lead now is worth more than several in Year 13.

PAGES 3 AND 14

Year 13

TWO PROCESSES AT ONCE

Apprenticeships and UCAS run side by side

Typical windows, taken from the last full cycle. Firms move their dates every year, so check onTime for the live ones.

August	The first school leaver and degree apprenticeship programmes open
September	22 opened last cycle, including J.P. Morgan, Barclays, Bank of America, Deloitte, KPMG and PwC Flying Start
October	18 opened last cycle, including Goldman Sachs and HSBC. HSBC closed in mid-October
15 October	**UCAS: Oxford, Cambridge, medicine, dentistry, veterinary**
November	9 opened last cycle, including Morgan Stanley
December	16 opened last cycle, including Bank of England and Bank of America Global Markets. Some close before Christmas
Mid-January	**UCAS: main equal consideration deadline (13 January in 2027)**
Jan to Mar	Schroders, BlackRock, Standard Chartered, BNP Paribas, Santander, LSEG, the FCA, Fidelity and Nationwide
End of June	**UCAS: final applications before Clearing (30 June in 2027)**

Apprenticeship applications typically open — UCAS deadline

AFTER SIXTH FORM · FROM AUTUMN 2027

Three routes, one destination

ROUTE 01

University, then a graduate scheme

FIRST TERM

The applications that matter begin

In the first few weeks, not in the final year.

FIRST YEAR

Spring week

In a typical cycle, October is the busiest spring week month.

SECOND YEAR

Summer internship

Often what converts into the job. September is typically the busiest internship month.

FINAL YEAR

Graduate scheme applications

Students with offers at the major banks have usually done both steps above.

ROUTE 02

Degree apprenticeship

DAY ONE

Employed and paid

No UCAS form and no tuition debt. Barclays: a permanent role from day one.

YEAR ONE

£25,200 at Barclays

Barclays publishes its figure. Most banks describe pay only as "competitive".

ALONGSIDE THE JOB

A degree with a partner university

J.P. Morgan with Exeter, a BSc in Applied Finance and Banking. HSBC runs a 50-month programme with Exeter.

ROUTE 03

School leaver programme

DAY ONE

Similar in shape

But not always carrying a degree.

THE PROGRAMME

Check what it awards

Citi describes its London programme as an 18 to 22 month professional qualification rather than a degree.

BEFORE COMMITTING

Several years at stake

Check the qualification before your child commits to it.

First job From a graduate scheme, often by way of the internship. On an apprenticeship, your child is already in the role.

The money, side by side

UNIVERSITY	DEGREE APPRENTICESHIP	SCHOOL LEAVER PROGRAMME
£9,790 a year tuition fee cap, England, 2026/27 Average debt at graduation £53,500, English students, 2026 cohort	**£25,200** year one pay at Barclays Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan, Morgan Stanley and HSBC describe pay only as "competitive"	Citi describes pay only as "competitive" Salary-comparison site figures are self-reported and undated, so are not used

SOURCE Chapters 2, 3 and 5. Competition: 11.3 applications per place for Level 6 degree apprenticeships in England, up from 2.8 three years ago (page 9).

CHAPTER 03

What they actually pay

This is the section most parents turn to first, and it is also where the published information is thinnest. Only a minority of firms publish a salary figure at all.

What the firms publish

FIRM AND PROGRAMME	YEAR ONE PAY	NOTES
Barclays Higher and degree apprenticeships	**£25,200**	Permanent role from day one. Barclays' own careers site; the page carries no date stamp.
PwC Flying Start Business Management, Belfast	**£28,900 per year**	Tuition fully funded by PwC. Requires 112 UCAS points plus GCSE English and Maths.
Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan, Morgan Stanley, HSBC, Citi	Not published	All five describe pay only as "competitive". Figures on salary-comparison sites are self-reported and undated, so are not used here.

SOURCE Employer careers sites, accessed 8 October 2026. PwC Flying Start programme pages.

What university costs instead

FIGURE	VALUE
Full-time undergraduate tuition fee cap, England, 2026/27	**£9,790 per year**
Average debt at graduation, English students (2026 cohort)	**£53,500**

SOURCE Fee cap: legislation.gov.uk impact assessment, January 2026. Debt: House of Commons Library, Student Loan Statistics, 15 July 2026.

A student on the Barclays programme earns roughly £25,000 in the year that a university student spends roughly £9,790 on tuition alone. Over three years, before living costs, that is a difference of well over £100,000 in direction of travel. That is not an argument against university. It is an argument for knowing the comparison exists.

AN HONEST WORD ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

The asymmetry here is worth naming. Competition data is public and easy to find. Pay data, which is what parents most want, is mostly not published. If a guide or a website gives you a confident salary figure for a Goldman Sachs or J.P. Morgan apprenticeship, ask where it came from.

CHAPTER 04

How competitive it has become

Competition has intensified sharply, and for a reason most coverage misses: it is not only that more students are applying. It is that there are fewer places.

Degree apprenticeships in England

	THREE YEARS AGO	NOW	THREE YEARS AGO, THEN NOW
Applicants	8,100	21,800	
Advertised places	7,300	3,700	
Applications per place (Level 6)	2.8	11.3	

SOURCE BBC analysis of government data, reported by Personnel Today, 19 August 2026. These figures cover all Level 6 degree apprenticeships in England advertised on the government's Find an Apprenticeship service. They are not finance-specific, and because most major banks advertise on their own websites rather than that service, the finance figure is likely to be considerably higher. No verified finance-specific figure is publicly available. Bars are drawn to scale within each row.

Applicants have nearly tripled while advertised places have roughly halved. The ratio has risen fourfold in three years.

Searches for degree apprenticeships are reported to be up more than 80 per cent this year alone.

Higher apprenticeships at Levels 4 to 7 have gone from 13 per cent of all apprenticeship starts in 2017/18 to 40 per cent in 2024/25. The route your child is considering is being discovered by everybody else at the same time.

SOURCE House of Commons Library, Apprenticeship statistics for England, 4 December 2025.

HIGHER APPRENTICESHIPS, SHARE OF ALL APPRENTICESHIP STARTS



Levels 4 to 7, England. Bar length is the share of all starts, on a scale of 0 to 100 per cent.

CHAPTER 05 · IF YOU READ ONLY ONE PAGE, READ THIS ONE

When it actually happens

The single most common reason capable students miss out is that nobody told them the calendar.

These are **typical windows**, taken from the last full cycle. Firms move their dates every year, usually earlier, so use this page to plan the year and check the live dates before your child applies.

TYPICAL WINDOW	SCHOOL LEAVER AND DEGREE APPRENTICESHIPS	SPRING WEEKS AND INTERNSHIPS
August	The first programmes open	Summer internships open: **33 firms** last cycle, the densest fortnight of the year
September	**22 opened** last cycle, including J.P. Morgan, Barclays, Bank of America, Deloitte, KPMG and PwC Flying Start	Busiest internship month: **47 firms**
October	**18 opened**, including Goldman Sachs and HSBC. HSBC closed in mid-October	Busiest spring week month: most of the major banks land here
November	**9 opened**, including Morgan Stanley	**13** spring weeks opened
December	**16 opened**, including Bank of England and Bank of America Global Markets	Employers expect most applications in by Christmas
January	**6 opened**, including Schroders, BlackRock and Standard Chartered	**16** spring weeks opened. First-round interviews begin
February	**13 opened**, including BNP Paribas, Santander and LSEG	**15** spring weeks opened
March	**9 opened**, including the FCA, Fidelity and Nationwide	Assessment centres begin

SOURCE Trackr apprenticeship, spring week and summer internship timelines covering 96 programmes, last full cycle; employer careers sites. Counts show how many opened in that month last cycle. They are typical windows, not employer announcements for this year.

LIVE DATES

Check onTime for the dates that are open now

Spring weeks, internships, apprenticeships and graduate roles at about 161 firms, each linked to the firm's own application page. Free. ondeskmarkets.com/ontime

The UCAS dates

DEADLINE	DATE
Oxford, Cambridge, medicine, dentistry, veterinary	**15 October 2026, 18:00**
Main equal consideration deadline	**13 January 2027, 18:00**
Final applications before Clearing	**30 June 2027, 18:00**

SOURCE Two independent sources citing UCAS, checked 8 October 2026. Confirm at ucas.com. For courses starting in 2026 and later, the UCAS personal statement is three set questions, up to 4,000 characters in total.

The two processes, side by side

October to January, typical windows drawn from the two tables in this chapter.

	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY
UCAS	**15 October** Oxford, Cambridge, medicine, dentistry, veterinary			**13 January** Main equal consideration deadline
Degree apprenticeships	**18 opened** Goldman Sachs and HSBC. **HSBC closed mid-October**	**9 opened** Including Morgan Stanley	**16 opened** Bank of England, Bank of America Global Markets	**6 opened** Schroders, BlackRock, Standard Chartered
Spring weeks and internships	**Busiest spring week month** Most of the major banks land here	**13 opened** Spring weeks	**By Christmas** Employers expect most applications in	**16 opened** First-round interviews begin

Notice what sits beside the UCAS dates. While a Year 13 student is writing a personal statement in October, the degree apprenticeship applications at Goldman Sachs and HSBC are typically open, and some are already closing. The two processes run at the same time and most students are only told about one of them.

CHAPTER 06

The deadline is not the deadline

This is the single most useful thing in this guide, and it comes from the employers themselves rather than from anybody's opinion.

Most finance employers review applications as they arrive and fill places before the published closing date. An application submitted in September and an identical one submitted in December are not competing on equal terms.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

HSBC On its live vacancy	“Applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis… we may close this vacancy earlier than the advertised closing date if we receive a high volume of applications. Please apply as soon as possible to be considered.”
J.P. Morgan On its apprenticeship posting	“We will be filling our classes on a rolling basis.”
UBS On its careers site	“Applications are accepted and considered on a rolling basis.”
Deloitte	Explicitly warns that it may close applications early and recommends applying as soon as possible.
Goldman Sachs	Its 2027 apprenticeship page carries no closing date at all.

SOURCE Employer careers sites and live vacancy postings, accessed 8 October 2026. Trackr records **89 of 96** finance apprenticeship programmes as rolling.

The nuance that matters: apply early, not hastily. A tailored application submitted promptly beats both a rushed early one and a polished late one. The practical implication is that the preparation has to happen before the window opens, not during it.

CHAPTER 07

What actually decides it

Grades get an application read. After that, the decision turns on a set of skills that are rarely taught anywhere in the school system.

01 **Talking about yourself without either shrinking or boasting.**
Most sixth formers have never had to do this. They either undersell everything they have done or recite a list. Both read badly.

02 **Writing an application that survives an automated screen.**
Many applications are filtered before a person reads them. Structure, specificity and the right language matter more than most students realise.

03 **Psychometric and situational tests.**
SHL, HireVue, Pymetrics and Arctic Shores are standard at this level. They are practisable, and students who have never seen one are at a real disadvantage.

04 **Assessment centres and group exercises.**
Performed in front of assessors, against other candidates, usually for the first time in a student's life.

05 **Handling rejection without stopping.**
This matters more than anything else on the list. A student applying to competitive programmes will be rejected repeatedly. The ones who get in are usually not the ones who were rejected least.

Choosing universities and courses properly

There is a great deal of publicly available information on which universities and courses lead where: entry requirements, graduate destinations, which employers actually recruit from which institutions. Almost no family knows how to find or read it, so university choices are often made on reputation, an open day, or where a friend is going.

That decision shapes which employers will consider your child three years later. It deserves more analysis than it usually gets.

CHAPTER 08

How to help without taking over

The most common question parents ask us is some version of: how involved should I be? Here is what tends to work.

01 **Own the calendar, not the content.**

Knowing that Goldman Sachs applications are open and HSBC closes this month is genuinely useful. Writing any part of the application is not, and assessors can tell.

02 **Ask what, not whether.**

"Have you done your application?" produces defensiveness. "What does the first stage involve?" produces a conversation.

03 **Treat rejection as information, not as a verdict.**

How you react to the first rejection largely determines whether your child tells you about the second.

04 **Separate your preference from their decision.**

Many parents have a quiet preference for university. That is understandable, and worth saying out loud rather than letting it leak into every conversation.

05 **Get the school involved early.**

Careers leads are usually glad to help and are rarely asked. A single conversation in Year 12 is worth more than several in Year 13.

If your child has no idea what they want, that is normal and it is not a problem to be solved this term. The useful move at that stage is exposure, seeing what these jobs actually involve day to day, not forcing a decision.

CHAPTER 09

Before you talk to your child

Four questions that open a real conversation, and the words you will hear.

01 **“Which part of finance interests you most, and why?”**

Banking, markets, investing, quant or something else. Not knowing yet is fine, and is an answer in itself.

02 **“Have you looked at degree apprenticeships as well as university?”**

A student can apply through UCAS and to degree apprenticeships in the same year, and many keep both open until the offers arrive.

03 **“When do the applications you care about open?”**

If they do not know, that is the first thing to find out together. The windows are on page 10, and live dates on onTime.

04 **“What is one thing you could do this month?”**

A society, an insight day, a competition, or one finance story a week with a view on it. Small and regular beats a last-minute rush.

Words you will hear

Spring week

A short insight programme, usually about a week, for first-year university students. A strong one can lead to an internship.

Summer internship

About 9 to 10 weeks, in the summer before the final year. Often what converts into the graduate job.

Degree apprenticeship

A paid job with a degree studied alongside it, tuition paid by the employer. No UCAS form.

School leaver programme

A paid job straight after A-levels with structured training. Not always a degree, so check what it awards.

Rolling basis

Applications are read as they arrive, so places can fill before the published closing date.

Online tests

Numerical, verbal, situational or game-based tests, usually sat at home soon after applying.

Assessment centre

The final round, in person or online: interviews, group exercises and case work. Some banks call it a superday.

Level 6

The apprenticeship level that is equivalent to a bachelor's degree.

A word of caution: no one can guarantee a place at a bank, and nobody honest will promise one. Be wary of anyone who does.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

Three steps, in this order

This guide gives you the routes, the pay and the calendar. It cannot tell you where your child stands today. These three steps do.

1

FREE · ABOUT 15 MINUTES · TODAY

Take onTrack, the free Desk-Ready Score

Your child answers on their own. They get a score out of 30 across the six skills firms assess, their best-fit area of finance and their next three steps.

ondeskmarkets.com/ontrack →

SCAN FOR ONTRACK

2

FREE · 30 MINUTES · THIS WEEK

Book the free 30-minute call

With you, and your child if they want to join. We go through the score, the route and the dates for their year, and say plainly what is realistic.

Within 24 hours you get a written plan: what to do, in what order, and by when. Take onTrack first and we'll already have the result, so the call starts where your child is.

ondeskmarkets.com/book →

SCAN TO BOOK THE FREE CALL

3

IF THE PLAN SAYS SO

The one programme your child needs

The plan names one programme for your child's stage, or tells you none is needed yet. It is not a menu.

University Programme	Years 12 and 13, aiming for a university or degree apprenticeship offer · 10 sessions	**£2,450**
Spring Week Programme	First-year university students · 8 sessions	**£1,950**
Internship Programme	Penultimate-year students · 8 sessions	**£2,450**
Graduate Programme	Final-year students and graduates · 6 sessions	**£1,950**
onDesk One	Every stage, from sixth form to the first job · by application	**From £5,000 a year**

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87% of coached students secured a spring week, internship or full-time offer ★★★★★ **4.9** on Google

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