

READING COMPREHENSION TEST

Answer all the following questions about the document in English **in your own words**.

The questions may not follow the order of the text.

N.B.: text copy is marked zero

1. Present the document in ONE sentence. (/1)
2. What does the text deal with? Sum it up in a 3-line paragraph. (/1)
3. Explain the main difference between degree apprenticeships and traditional ones. (/2)
4. Who pays university fees for degree apprenticeship trainees? (/2)
5. What jobs are Radhika Parmar and Amber Westmoreland training for? (/2)
6. What did Amber Westmoreland's mother think of her daughter's decision to become an apprentice? Why? (/3)
7. What is the main advantage of apprenticeships for trainees? Illustrate with an example from the text. (/2)
8. Can apprentices have the same kind of social lives as full-time students? (/3)
9. According to Sean Coughlan, why do apprenticeships have a bad reputation? Is it justified? (/2)
10. What makes apprenticeships difficult? (/2)

The debt-free alternative to university

Going to university is often thought of as the gold standard of academic success and a rite of passage for many young people, but some are breaking with tradition and taking up degree apprenticeships instead.

When 19-year-old Radhika Parmar finishes her four-and-a-half-year course she will be awarded a BSc Hons Degree in Digital and Technology Solutions. But unlike most students, Parmar will not start her working life burdened by the debt of tuition fees and will not have to search for a job.

Parmar has just completed the first year of a degree apprenticeship at IT consultancy Capgemini. She works full-time at the company as an applications consultant, gaining on-the-job training and earning a salary while also studying for a degree. There are no tuition fees to pay as the government covers two-thirds of the costs, while the employer pays a third.

Introduced by the government in 2015, most degree apprenticeships are in areas such as engineering and technology. Apprentices earn an average starting salary of £17,511, rising to £24,652 when the apprenticeship is finished.

Although Parmar applied to study computer science at university, she soon made it her plan B after hearing about the degree apprenticeship. "Everything I'll learn during my degree I'll be putting into practice in my job," she says.

Twenty-two-year-old Amber Westmoreland is half-way through a tax accounting apprenticeship with Ernst & Young. Working as an assistant tax adviser, by the end of her five-year course she will qualify as a chartered accountant and a chartered tax adviser. Though she will not have a degree, the qualifications she will gain are those that any graduate has to acquire in order to become an accountant.

Westmoreland had to convince her mother, a university lecturer, that she was making the right choice. "She was the first in her family to go to university," says Westmoreland. "I think she saw it as a step backwards rather than a step forwards. She was also worried that other companies wouldn't recognise the qualification that I'm doing, even though it's the qualification you have to do to be a chartered accountant."

The traditional degree might be more well-known, but for both women the money they earn has given them freedom and independence. With her wages Westmoreland could afford to move out of home and rent a place in Manchester, where she works. And unlike most university students, she has managed to put money aside for costly holidays. "Last year one of my friends was in New Zealand, so I saved up and went to New Zealand for a couple of weeks to see her," says Westmoreland.

One attraction of university is the lifestyle - socialising, parties, a peer group of friends of the same age, some of whom may become friends for life. For Parmar, her company offers an echo of this with its initial training programme, which lasts three months. "On top of that, with Capgemini's university programme we do go down to Aston University and we get to socialise with other people that are doing the degree, even if they are at different stages," she says. Westmoreland says one thing she likes about the apprenticeship is the opportunity to mix with a wider variety of age groups.

But according to the BBC's Sean Coughlan, there is somehow still a stigma attached to the idea of apprenticeships. "It's proved very hard to change the unspoken perception that apprenticeships and vocational qualifications are only for those who have struggled with academic exams," says Coughlan.

This could not be further from the truth for Parmar and Westmoreland. They are academic high-achievers who have decided to break away from the traditional university pathway, and both stress that degree apprenticeships are far from an easy option. "It's really quite difficult," says Parmar, "because you do your job 9am to 5pm and then you go home after work and you have to do the degree off your own back." For Westmoreland, studying and working full-time can be exhausting, but it is all worthwhile. "Sometimes when you're doing exams and you're still doing work at the same time, it seems really hard," says Westmoreland, "but at the end of the day I definitely don't regret it."

Source: Adapted from Lucy WALLIS, "The debt-free alternative to university," *BBC News*, 10 October 2016, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37550769>>.