

WHEN AND HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR COURSE OR APPRENTICESHIP

The purpose of this section is to help you decide when and how it would be best for you to choose a course or apprenticeship. Choosing a suitable way to provide you with some of the tools you will need to pursue a career behind the scenes is always a very important decision. You will always be in a position whereby you will be investing a great deal in the process. You will be committing to invest your time, your energy and your money, not only to pay for tuition and examination or assessment fees, but also in living and travel expenses or the salary you receive. You will want to be confident that your investment is worthwhile and that it will achieve the goals you have set yourself. To help you achieve this you must always think about what it is that you really need to do next to prepare you for work or allow you to progress in your career. When you have identified exactly what you need to do to reach your goal you must analyse carefully the next step or steps you need to take to get there.

To undertake any job you need to be competent at the tasks that job requires. Competence is the ability to undertake responsibilities and to perform tasks to a recognised standard on a regular basis. Competence is always a combination of three fundamental ingredients:

1. Skill,
2. Knowledge and
3. Experience.

When thinking about how to choose the best way to prepare yourself for any kind of job it is always sensible to consider not only how you will gain the necessary knowledge you will need for the work but also how you will gain the skills you will need and how and where you will find opportunities to develop the necessary experience that you will require.

Very often you will decide that in order to most effectively gain the skills and knowledge you need next you must first gain some related experience.

When thinking about how to prepare for a career and how to go about choosing a course or apprenticeship it is always a good idea to identify what you need in terms of skill, knowledge and experience. You can do this by talking to people who already work in the industry, potential employers who may or may not run apprenticeship schemes or to advisors and teaching staff involved in running related training and courses of education. It is also very helpful to speak to organisations which represent the interests of the different backstage careers: Association of British Theatre Technicians; Association of Lighting Designers; Association of Sound Designers; Stage Management Association; etc.

When choosing a course or apprenticeship remember that not all courses are designed to achieve the same thing and that different types of course will be more appropriate for your own needs at different points in your education and career.

In order to understand exactly what a course or apprenticeship is designed to provide it is always best to talk to employers, advisors or teaching staff involved in delivering the course itself. However, it is useful to think about four general types of courses when you start your discussions.

1. Educational Courses with a vocational context
2. Vocational Courses
3. Educational Courses in Preparation for a Vocational Career
4. Career Development Courses

There are now also apprenticeships available in a number of areas, known as frameworks, which relate to working backstage or front of house. These frameworks are:

1. Community Arts
2. Cultural and Heritage Venue Operations
3. Costume and Wardrobe
4. Live Events and Promotion
5. Music Business
6. Technical Theatre

Information on apprenticeships in these frameworks can be found on the National Apprenticeship Service website under “Arts, Media and Publishing”.

Educational Courses with a vocational context.

This type of course is designed to continue the delivery of a general educational syllabus but using the context of a particular industry or career to provide a basis for learning. These courses are a very useful way of continuing general education while beginning to gain foundation knowledge in a particular career area.

Vocational Courses

These courses are specifically designed to provide students with the knowledge they require for a particular job. They also provide opportunities for skills to be obtained and for participants to begin to gain the experience they require to gain competence in their chosen career. These courses are often a very good way of obtaining sufficient competence to commence professional work in a particular job.

Educational Course in Preparation for a Vocational Career

This type of course is very often a higher education course leading to a degree in a particular vocational subject. The course will develop academic skills as well as providing for the acquisition of vocational knowledge and perhaps some skills and experience.

Career Development Courses

These courses very often provide specific training in particular equipment or techniques. They may be short courses and they are often designed to be taken as part of on-going career development.

Apprenticeships

By becoming an apprentice you gain immediate access to employment in your chosen career. Your employer will pay you the Apprentice National Minimum Wage and if you are over 19 the full national minimum wage for your age group once you have completed the first year of your apprenticeship. You will be given the opportunities to gain skill and knowledge both in the workplace and by attending courses which may be at a local college or delivered by industry trainers. Some Technical Theatre apprenticeships use industry training provided by the Association of British Theatre Technicians, BECTU, the media and entertainment union, and other industry trainers and you will undertake the training elements of your apprenticeship with employed and freelance technicians from other parts of the industry, not just with other apprentices.

The great advantage of following an apprenticeship is that you are in the perfect place to develop your experience at the same rate as you acquire new skills and knowledge. As you are in the working environment you will have the opportunity to put into practice the skill and knowledge you gain and apply it in varying conditions over a significant period of time.

As a general point all courses tend to include good opportunities to achieve new knowledge. Some, but not all, provide opportunities for developing and practising new skills both mental and physical. The hardest element for a course to provide is experience whereas apprenticeships are very good at providing this.

It is also worth remembering that it is very often the case that it is much easier to absorb new knowledge and indeed gain much more benefit from a knowledge based course if you have had some experience beforehand. It is certainly true that you will find studying on a course related to working backstage much more beneficial and interesting if you have already had the opportunity to become familiar with the working environment behind the scenes.

Working behind the scenes is very interesting and challenging and can provide a huge amount of satisfaction. However, it is never possible to predict what knowledge, skills or experience will be useful in solving the next problem with which you will be presented. In planning a training path towards working backstage it is always worth continuing a broad education as long as possible while pursuing opportunities to gain experience in the working environment whenever you can. Such experience can be gained through the support of performances at school, college and university. There are many local, community, amateur and professional companies who will give interested volunteers the opportunity to gain experience working on the presentation and support of performance. There are opportunities for part-time employment in many theatres and venues through which experience can be gained while still pursuing general education.

Of the four types of course discussed above the first three very often represent the last opportunity within your working career by which you are able to continue learning and pursue the acquisition of knowledge on a full-time basis. After the completion of these courses the fact that you will wish to start working in the

industry means that you will have to pursue further learning at the same time as being employed. Such courses very often provide you with the biggest single component of your professional knowledge and will be the basis on which you found your career.

Apprenticeships allow you to enter the world of work and still have a proportion of your working day dedicated to learning new skills and knowledge. For the rest of the time you are developing your experience which is an immensely valuable asset.

In conclusion here is a brief checklist which you will find helpful when considering when and how to choose a course or apprenticeship:

1. Seek to pursue a broad education when it is available while gaining experience behind the scenes wherever and whenever possible.
2. Always identify what your learning requirements are and what the balance is between skill, knowledge and experience.
3. Remember that some prior experience is very useful in making the most of opportunities to gain further knowledge and skills.
4. Identify your learning aims and make sure you understand what steps you need to take to achieve them.
5. Always discuss your needs and the content and strengths of courses or apprenticeships with the appropriate advisors before making any decisions.
6. Remember that you will continue to gain new skills, knowledge and experience throughout your career and that this can be one of the most rewarding aspects of your working experience.