



The Ultimate Financial Survival Guide for School Leavers

For Students Aged 15 – 18
(Years 11-13) and Their Parents



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Leaving school or college is one of the most exciting and overwhelming times in a young person's life.

Whether you're planning to go to university, start an apprenticeship, enter the world of work, or explore entrepreneurial ambitions, understanding how to manage money is a vital life skill that will shape your future.

This practical and accessible financial guide is designed to support both students and parents as they navigate the transition from education to adulthood. From budgeting and saving to understanding payslips, credit, and tax, we'll walk you through the essentials of personal finance for school leavers, giving you the confidence to make smart financial choices—right from the start.

Packed with tips, tools, and real-world examples, this guide will help you avoid common money mistakes, reduce financial stress, and take charge of your financial independence. Whether you're earning your first paycheque, applying for student finance, or opening your first bank account, this is your go-to resource for life after school.

Let's take the uncertainty out of what comes next—and start building a financially secure future today.

Let us delve into some key financial lessons that every school leaver should know.



Employment

Many students will start employment either directly after leaving school or after leaving further education. Stepping into full-time employment, whether through an apprenticeship, a trainee role or first job, the shift from classroom to workplace can be a major adjustment.

Going from flexible timetables and long school holidays into full-time roles, working around 37-40 hours a week, over a five-day period, with just four to five weeks annual leave per year, can be quite intense. However, earning your own money, gaining financial independence, building your career, and learning valuable life skills comes with the territory.

Tax codes, tax bands, and allowances

When you start working your employer will ask you for details of your tax code. Your tax code provides them with information about how much you can earn before they need to deduct tax contributions from your pay. If you have not worked before then you will need to complete a starter checklist for your new employer. If you have left a previous job, then your employer should have provided you with a form P45, to provide to your new employer and they will provide details of your tax code

The standard personal allowance for the 2026/2027 tax year is £12,570. This means any annual earnings under this amount will be made tax free.

Once you earn above this amount the tax you will pay will depend on what tax band your earnings fall into.

Basic rate: £12,571 – £50,270 20%

Higher rate: £50,271 – £125,140 40%

Additional rate: > £125,140 45%

To keep track of your tax and NI we recommend that you open a personal tax account with HMRC at [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

Your National Insurance Number – what is it and why do you have one?

Shortly before you turn 16, you will receive a National Insurance (NI) number in a communication sent to you by H M Revenue & Customs (HMRC). This number is unique to you and will be used to make sure your National Insurance and Tax contributions are tracked against your name only.

Paying Tax and National Insurance: when you are working and earn over a certain amount (£242 per week from 06/04/2026) you will pay NI contributions. These fund public services like the NHS, state pensions and unemployment benefits.

Who will you need to give your NI number to?

You should provide your NI number to your employer to ensure that they pay you correctly and your taxes are recorded with HMRC. You may also need to provide it to HMRC and the Department for work and pensions (DWP). You may also need to provide it to other government offices and financial institutions like banks.

Future benefits

National Insurance contributions count towards certain benefits and state pension. To receive the full state pension, you typically need 35 qualifying years of NI contributions or credits.

Top tip

Keep your NI number safe. To prevent identity fraud do not share it with anyone who does not need it.

The National Minimum Wage – What are you entitled to?

When you start work it is important to know your rights, including how much you should be paid.

The National Minimum Wage as of 1 April 2026:

Aged 21 and over £12.71

Aged 18 to 20 £10.85

Under 18 £8.00

Apprentice* £8.00

*Apprentices are entitled to this rate if they are aged under 19 or aged over 19 and in the first year of their apprenticeship.

Top tip

Check your pay slips to ensure that you are being paid correctly. There is a National Minimum wage calculator on [National Minimum Wage and Living Wage calculator for workers – GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-calculator). If you think you are not receiving the NMW and you should be you can contact www.acas.org.uk.

Understanding pay slips – Don't let the numbers confuse you

When your employer pays you, they should also supply you with a pay slip. The pay slip details your earnings and any deductions they have made. What to look out for:

➤ Gross Pay

This details your total earnings before deductions.

➤ Tax and NI deductions

These are the amounts taken out for income tax and National Insurance Contributions. Your employer pays these over to HMRC on your behalf.

➤ Net Pay

This is the amount that you will be paid.

Top tip

You can use the online tax checker at HMRC to confirm you are paying the right amount. Check your Income Tax for the current year – GOV.UK.

Opening and managing a bank account

Having access to a bank account is essential for receiving wages and managing your money.

➤ Choosing an account

Many accounts offer low fees, good apps, and interest on savings. Look for banks that offer youth or student accounts, or other perks.

➤ Online banking

Most bank accounts let you manage your money via mobile apps, this makes it easier to check your balance, transfer money and set up savings pots.



Apprenticeship – Earn While You Learn



Did you know that you can earn a salary while gaining a qualification and real work experience – all at the same time? That's exactly what an apprenticeship offers.

Apprenticeships are becoming an increasingly popular alternative to university, especially as more employers open these opportunities to school leavers. In fact, thanks to recent government incentives, even companies that once hired graduates are now offering apprenticeship routes into a wide range of careers.

If you already have an idea of the industry you would like to work in, an apprenticeship could be your ideal next step. You will typically spend one or two days a week studying at a local college or training provider—fully funded by your employer—while working full-time and earning a wage. Although the starting salary may be lower than in other entry-level jobs, you will be developing skills, gaining qualifications, and avoiding student debt.

How apprenticeships work

Apprenticeships combine practical training in a job with study.

As an apprentice you'll:

- Be an employee earning a wage and receiving holiday pay
- Work alongside experienced staff
- Gain job-specific skills
- Get time for training and study related to your role (at least 20% of your normal working hours)

Apprenticeships take 1 to 5 years to complete depending on their level.

Levels of apprenticeship

Apprenticeships have equivalent educational levels.

| | Level | Equivalent educational level |
|--------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Intermediate | 2 | GCSE |
| Advanced | 3 | A level |
| Higher | 4, 5, 6 and 7 | Foundation degree and above |
| Degree | 6 and 7 | Bachelor's or master's degree |

Some apprenticeships may also give you an additional qualification, such as a Diploma.

Who can start an apprenticeship

To start an apprenticeship, you'll need to be:

- 16 or over
- Living in England
- Not in full-time education

Top tip



You can explore this option and apply for an apprenticeship while you're still at school, but you'll need to be 16 or over by the end of the summer holidays to start the apprenticeship. Check out more resources and useful tips and vacancies that [UCAS has to offer on apprentices](#). Should you want to explore the apprenticeship route with Rayner Essex, take a deep dive into [Your Guide to Becoming an Accounting Apprentice](#).

University

Choosing to go to university is a major decision – one that can shape your future career, lifestyle, and finances. While higher education opens doors to specialist knowledge and graduate opportunities, it also comes with significant costs that are important to understand from the start.

If you're living in England, most universities charge up to £9,535 per year in tuition fees (increasing to £9,790 in the 2026/27 academic year), and you'll also need to factor in accommodation and day-to-day living expenses. For many students, this brings the total cost of a three-year course to over £55,000—and more if you're studying in London.

Fortunately, the Student Loans Company offers financial support through tuition and maintenance loans, with repayments only starting once you're earning above the income threshold. However, student loans accrue interest from the day they're issued, so budgeting wisely and understanding the long-term commitment is essential.

Whether university is the right path for you depends on your career goals, personal interests, and financial situation—but with the right information, you can make a confident and informed choice.



Student finance – How it works and what you need to know

If your next step is university then applying for student finance can help you cover the costs. How does it work, and what does it cover?

➤ Tuition fees

From the 2026/27 academic year the maximum tuition fee for UK undergraduate students will increase to £9,790. This money is paid directly to your university.

➤ Maintenance loan

This helps with living costs such as rent, food and travel. The amount you will receive will depend on your household income, where you will be living and whether your study will be full or part time.

➤ How to apply

You will need to apply online through Student Finance England. You will need details of your household income, your course, and your university.

➤ Making repayments

You will start repaying your loan once you earn above the threshold for your repayment plan. If you started your course on or after 1 August 2023 you will be on Plan 5.

You'll only repay when your income is over £480 a week, £2,083 a month or £25,000 a year. Repayments are 9% of your earnings above the threshold. For example, if you earn £30,000 you will repay 9% of £5,000 so £ 450 annually.

How much interest you're charged depends on which plan you're on. On plan 5 you are charged interest at the retail price index which is currently 3.2% for the year 1 September 2025 to 31 August 2026.

Plan 5 loans are written off 40 years after the April you were first due to repay.

Top tip



The maintenance loan will be paid to you in three installments during the academic year, so it is wise to budget in advance. However, you can still apply for a loan up to 9 months after the start of the academic year for your course.

Budgeting basics – Manage your money like a pro

Being able to budget will ensure you keep on top of your finances. How can you create a simple budget?

➤ Plan

Keep track of everything you earn and spend, there are apps that can help with this, including online banking apps.

➤ Track your income and expenses

Allocate a percentage of your income to the essentials like rent and food, a percentage to wants like entertainment and clothes and the remainder towards savings or paying off debt.

➤ Emergency fund

Try to build up 3-6 months' worth of savings for essential expenses, in case of unexpected costs or emergencies.

Top tip



Look for student discounts that can help stretch your budget further.

Discounts and support for students – Stretch your budget further

Student discounts are available to help students save money on various goods and services.

➤ Free apps like Unidays and Student Beans

These are available to those studying at sixth form, college, or university. They offer access to discounts on over 800+ brands. You will need to sign up and verify your full-time student status education on an annual basis, prior to using them.

➤ 16-25 Railcard

This will cost £35 for 1 year and £ 80 for three years but will save you one-third off most travel.

➤ Discounted bus and coach travel

Many cities offer discounted bus passes; you will need to check your local operator's website for details.

➤ Health and wellbeing

If you need regular prescriptions students can apply for a Prescription Prepayment Certificate (PPC) to save money on medication.

➤ Help with living costs

If you are in higher education, you may be eligible to apply for bursaries, scholarships, or awards through your college or university. Each institution will have their own criteria for eligibility, how much you can receive and how to apply.

Top tip



Carry your student ID with you, it will be the key to unlocking discounts everywhere you go.



Self-Employment – Starting your own business

If you have a business idea you would like to pursue, you may prefer to start your own business rather than work for someone else. There are several ways to set up a business, depending on your goals and the resources available to you.

Types of business for entrepreneurs



Sole trader

This is the simplest way to run a business. You are self-employed and will need to track your income and expenses to determine the profit of the business, which will be yours to keep. You will need to register with HMRC, file a tax return annually and pay six monthly tax instalments as well as keeping financial records on your tax matters.



Partnership

This involves setting up a business with others and the partnership splits the responsibilities and profits between its partners. Like sole traders you will need to meet your obligations with HMRC, file your tax returns, and keep business records.



Limited company

This is a separate legal entity from you. Your personal assets will be protected if the company gets into financial difficulty. The company would need to be registered with Companies House, this method requires more administration, but it can be tax efficient for high earners.

Top tip



There are government backed start up loan schemes and charities such as the **Kings Trust** that can offer funding support, advice and workshops.

Credit and loans – handle borrowing wisely!

It is important to establish a strong financial reputation. At some point you may need to borrow money. Here is how to do it responsibly.

➤ Credit cards

Only spend what you can afford to repay in full each month, to avoid high interest charges. Do not be tempted by a high credit limit – just because you are offered more to spend does not mean you should spend it. If you do not have a regular monthly income, you should only spend within your means. Failing to repay the full balance each month can lead to mounting interest charges through compounding, making your debt difficult to manage and repay.

➤ Credit scores

Your credit score measures how reliable you are at repaying debt. Paying bills on time and managing credit responsibly from an early stage will help you build a strong credit history, opening the doors to better financial opportunities in the future.

Top tip



Remember student loans are repaid differently and should not impact on your credit score.

Staying out of debt

Avoid falling into debt by being mindful of your spending.

➤ Track spending

Small purchases add up. Be aware of where your money goes and when you will receive your income.

➤ Ask for help

If you are struggling then organisations such as [Step Change](#) and [National Debtline](#) can provide free support.

Saving for your future – it is never too early

The earlier you start saving, the more you will accumulate over time. Even if it is a small amount to begin with, it will encourage you to build good habits and develop strong financial management skills for the future.

Options include:

➤ Savings accounts

Many children's accounts are available up to the age of 17 and often offer higher rates of interest than normal accounts.

➤ ISA's

These allow you to save money tax free. You can also opt for a Lifetime ISA. This allows individuals aged 18 to 39 to save up to £4,000 annually, with the government adding a 25% bonus—up to £1,000 per year—to support first-time home purchases or retirement savings, provided certain conditions are met.

➤ Pensions

When you start a job, your employer may offer you the option to join a pension scheme. When you are aged 22 or over and earn at least £10,000 a year, your employer is required to automatically enroll you in a scheme.

Top tip



If you were born between 1 September 2002 and 2 January 2011, then you may have received a £250 cash government voucher that was invested into a **Child Trust Fund**. You will gain access to this fund, along with any additional contributions made by family members, when you turn 18. You can trace your account through HMRC by visiting:

➤ [gov.uk/child-trust-funds/find-a-child-trust-fund](https://www.gov.uk/child-trust-funds/find-a-child-trust-fund)

Taking the next steps with confidence



As you take your next steps beyond school or college, remember that being financially aware is one of the most powerful tools you can carry into adulthood.

The choices you make now—whether that's starting work, pursuing an apprenticeship, going to university, or launching your own business; can have long-term financial implications. Understanding these early on will help you make informed decisions and set you on a path to a more secure and successful financial future.

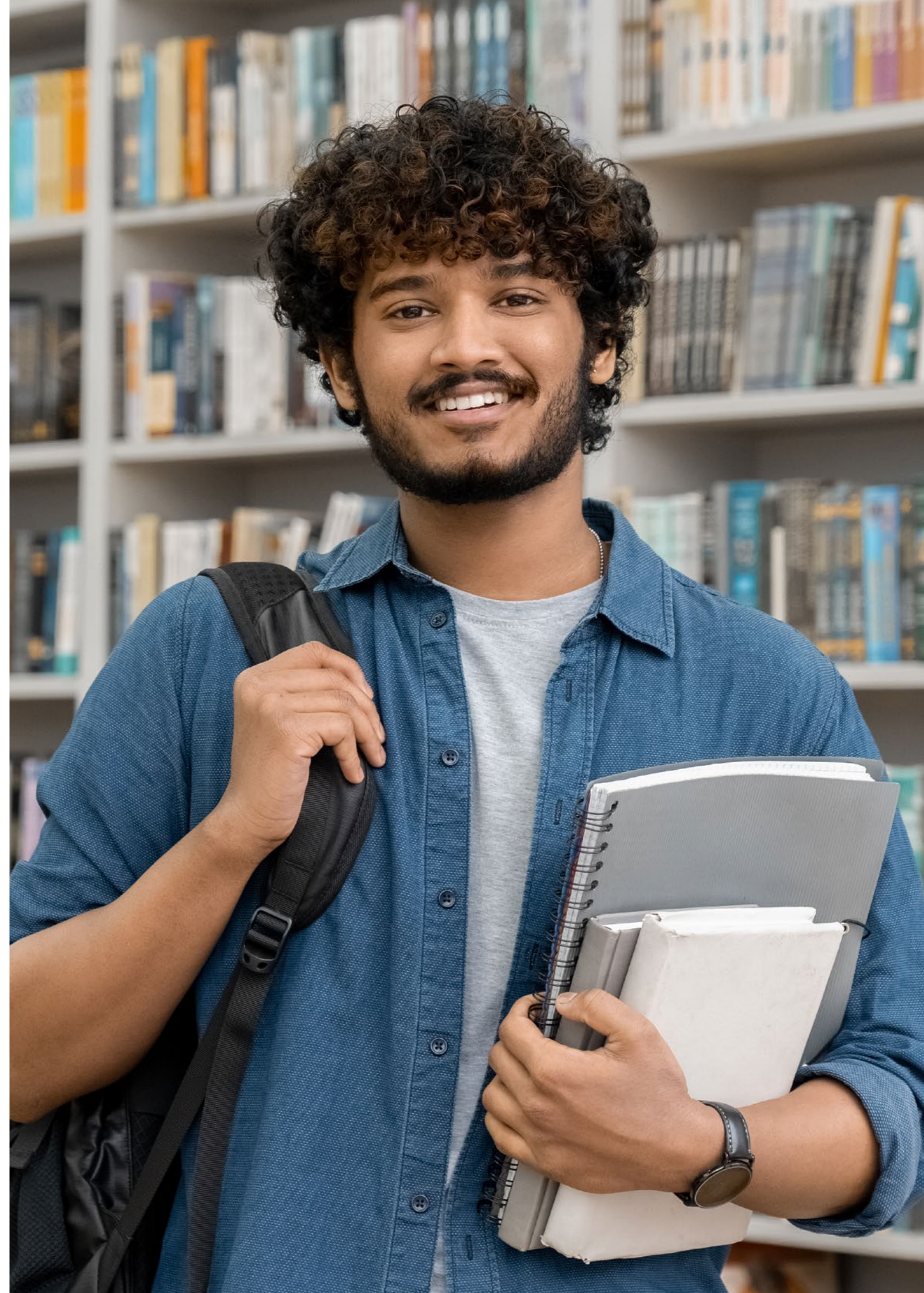
This guide is intended to provide general guidance and is for information purposes only. It should not be considered as financial advice, and Rayner Essex cannot accept any legal liability for actions taken based on its content.

For personal financial matters, we strongly recommend seeking tailored advice from qualified professionals such as accountants, solicitors, business advisers, or university career advisers. We also encourage you to explore the official resources and links provided throughout this guide for further support.

Whatever path you choose, we wish you every success and happiness in the journey ahead. Here's to a bright and fulfilling future!

Further detailed guidance

- [HM Revenue & Customs – GOV.UK](#)
- [Find an apprenticeship – GOV.UK](#)
- [Learn more about student finance for undergraduates – GOV.UK](#)
- [Student finance login – GOV.UK](#)
- [Free and impartial help with money, backed by the government – MoneyHelper](#)
- [Citizens Advice](#)
- [Hertfordshire Growth Hub](#)
- [Your Guide to Becoming an Accounting Apprentice – Rayner Essex](#)
- [Student Beans](#)
- [UNIDAYS](#)



**Progressive,
client-focused
accountancy**

Audit & Assurance

Accounting & Bookkeeping

Payroll

Tax Services

VAT Returns & Advice

Corporate Finance

International Expansion



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