



Whatever NEXT?

UNIVERSITY SIMPLY ISN'T THE RIGHT OPTION FOR EVERYONE, ARGUES SAL MCKEOWN, AND SCHOOLS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO INFORM YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE ALTERNATIVES OPEN TO THEM...

These days parents are often very torn when it comes to university education for their children. A recent Guardian/YouGov poll shows that six in ten parents across all social backgrounds with secondary school-age children think university degrees are not worth the money. Many are appalled by fees of £9,000 per year and the prospect of their children being burdened by debt – yet even so, the majority of parents still believe it is the best route to a successful career.

But parents don't necessarily know best. Often they are influenced by their own experiences or by what they hear in the media – so schools have a crucial role to play in widening their horizons, because the consequences of going to university and dropping out are horrendous.

Sandy Sutherland should know: he dropped out twice. He studied languages at Bristol University but left after a long spell in hospital with a dislocated ankle. He then moved to the University of Nottingham to

study architecture, but realised in just a few weeks that it was not the course for him. The university would not let him transfer to a languages course so he left. "The system was inflexible," he says, "but looking back, I realise I would have been staying at university for the wrong reasons."

Sandy is now working as a portfolio manager for a management consulting firm in London. "The environment suits me a lot better as it is fast paced, target driven and high pressure – conditions in which I thrive."

He believes that university is poor value for money since courses may have as few as ten contact hours per week. "I would advise anyone currently considering applying to think about what they want to do, why they want to do it and what the alternatives are," he concludes.

Advice for all

Donna Mason, careers development manager at Roding Valley High School in Loughton, works hard to give pupils appropriate advice and guidance. All the careers staff follow the Recognition of Quality Award (ROQA).

Roding Valley High School is part of a consortium in Essex, made up of six schools and Epping Forest College. Each year they have a joint careers fair open to all students in the area. The day provides information about college and university courses, apprenticeships and job opportunities with local and national employers – "Everything from the National Institute of Carpentry to barristers."

At present the school does not have a sixth form so at 16 pupils may go to college or to sixth form at another establishment, but an increasing number go onto local or national apprenticeships. The school's position on the Central line gives access to jobs in central London and former pupils with A levels under their belt are choosing alternatives to university such as Higher Level Apprenticeships with world famous companies such as Deloitte, Price Waterhouse Cooper, KPMG, and Barclays.

Net benefits

Those not so lucky with their careers advice provider can turn to an online resource like *uni's not for me* (unisnotforme.com). The site is not anti university but as the founders say: "We think each individual should be valued for his or her own talents rather than how good they are doing coursework. We're not anti-University (at all) but we do think are great alternatives out there that might be the right choice for some people."

The website was set up by Hattie Wrixon and her mother. Halfway through studying for A-levels, Hattie discovered she was on the wrong track. "I had a moment of realisation at school one day," she recalls, "as I sat in yet another English lesson with my teacher's words going in one ear and out the other. I realised that, though I would probably scrape

by on my A-levels, I was not engaged by academia. If I was bored now how would it be two years down the line sitting in a lecture hall and learning about a subject I had little interest in?"

Hattie spent a year learning business skills at college and is happy with a good social life and above all, no worries about a massive student debt.

Uni's not for me offers advice about apprenticeships, starting a business, going to college, NVQ options and getting the most from the gap year as well as featuring a wealth of success stories. Leah Harrop badgered the Chief Executive of Horwich Farrelly Solicitors selling the advantages of apprenticeships. "Two months later, I was at my very own desk with my very own telephone!" she ethuses. At 19 she is now a Legal Services Apprentice, earning a salary and gaining nationally recognised qualifications. "My day always starts off with a cup of tea, while checking my emails and sticking post it note reminders all over my computer screen. Then I go onto the fee earners' diaries and try to help them with their workload."

If Leah had chosen the traditional university route she would have had to wait a long time for the practical experience she now enjoys on a daily basis. She believes that after just a few months at the solicitors', she is much more confident about communicating with a wide range of people and will soon be allocated her own case load.



Self-starters

Over the past year more young people have seen the attractions of self-employment. According to a survey by RBS, just under twice as many people aged between 18 and 30 are now in the process of starting up in business compared to a year ago, a rise from 8% to 14%. But many need a leg-up to get them started.

Live UnLtd is a social venture that offers young people aged between 11-21 up to £5,000 of funding and mentoring to help them avoid the pitfalls. Applicants must show they have identified a problem, come up with a solution and can learn from the experience, and projects must have a positive social impact on the community.

The organisation funded Temi Mwale, 17, from Barnet. Her estate has problems with gangs and when her neighbour was murdered she decided to organise a six-week course to train gang members and give them the necessary skills to present a workshop to those who were not yet in gangs but may be headed in that direction, in the hope of encouraging them to make more positive choices. This meant hiring speakers who had experience with gang culture and using their knowledge to appeal to those attending.

Matt Sherry opted for a professional training course instead of a degree. He studied for A-levels in law, history and psychology and had a week's work experience at the Press Association. They advised him to find a course run by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) so he moved from Hartlepool to London and did a 20-week intensive course at News Associates in Wimbledon where he studied shorthand, law, public affairs and sports journalism. The fees are £3950, considerably less than universities charge.

He has no regrets about his choice. After three years at university Matt would be trying to gain a foothold in a very competitive industry. Instead, he spent time covering Olympics events, Test Matches and National Football League (NFL) games. He is now the editor of Gridiron, which is the UK's only NFL magazine, and feels that the experience he has gained far outweighs any benefits of going to university.

USEFUL LINKS

- nationalcareersweek.com – a UK-wide celebration of careers information, advice and guidance.
- careersbox.co.uk – a very good source of videos and careers information with teachers tools, information on apprenticeships and other forms of professional training.
- unisnotforme.com – exploring realistic alternatives to higher education.
- notgoingtouni.co.uk – covers apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships.
- liveunltd.com – funding and mentoring for young people.
- personalitypathways.com – about personality type and its applications.
- ideastap.com/education – briefs and projects in creative industries such as dance, theatre and photography for permanent, part-time and freelance workers.
- directions.org.uk/careers – jobs and work experience in the finance sector
- inspiringenterprise.rbs.com – RBS Enterprise Tracker.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sal McKeown is a freelance special needs journalist and author of *Brilliant Ideas for Using ICT in the Inclusive Classroom* (Routledge) and a book for parents, *How to help your Dyslexic and Dyspraxic Child* (Crimson Publishing).