

18+ STUDENT OPTIONS: THE NEW LANDSCAPE



**ALAN BULLOCK
GIVES A PERSONAL
VIEW OF THE
WAY OPTIONS
ARE CHANGING
FOR STUDENTS
COMPLETING
A LEVEL OR
EQUIVALENT
PROGRAMMES**

Thirty seven years as a guidance practitioner have done nothing to diminish the buzz I get when faced with sixth form students who don't know what they want to do. In this situation I have always found the use of a 'menu' immensely helpful. By this I mean a simple list of their immediate options, with sub-menus to support the items on the main menu.

They can't all be doctors!

Until a few years ago, there were three main items on my post A Level menu: university, employment and gap year. Now there are about thirty, with the increase in university tuition fees, the expansion of apprenticeship provision and the influence of globalisation combining to create a more fragmented landscape. I have often been asked to give presentations on 'alternatives to university', but in my view it's not simply a case of 'uni or not'. There is a whole spectrum of post-18 options now, with degree-level study being central to or a constituent part of many of them, but it's quite difficult to categorise some of the options or to identify clear demarcation lines between them.

What is clear is that more students, and parents, are questioning whether or not to go to university or the implications of degree course choice for employability. This can create more problems, because false assumptions are often made about the vocational relevance of different degree subjects and the realities of the market-place. I long to inspire more would-be podiatrists or food technologists amongst all the would-be doctors and lawyers and my handout called *"You can't all be doctors"* gets well-used.

"It's about the journey, isn't it?"

Besides which, what's wrong with going to uni without having clear career goals? I will never forget the client who wanted to apply for a degree in religious studies, but faced parental resistance because "it wouldn't lead to a job". *"But it's about the journey, isn't it?"* she said to me, tearfully. Added to this is what I perceive as an increasing obsession with the Russell Group which also skews students' aspirations. I often hear: *"I don't mind where I go as long as it's in the Russell Group"*.

In my new menu, Higher Education divides into various sub-categories from vocational to multidisciplinary. I do engage with the *"which unis are best for?"* question, because it constantly recurs, but I try to do so in a balanced, impartial way that allays some myths. Numerous new providers are also now very much on my radar, especially as cost differentials are not necessarily as prohibitive as they were, and not just private

sector degree course providers but also those who offer vocational training, whether for pilots, personal assistants or culinary arts.

Then there is the small issue of the global revolution that's going on. In an era of increasingly transnational higher education, young people around the world appear to be opting to study in other countries more than their UK counterparts. Spending some or all of your higher education abroad can have a very positive impact on employability and my own network of contacts now extends from Maastricht and Groningen to South Dakota. What's more, it seems to me that there has been a partial worldwide trend towards flexible, multidisciplinary bachelor degrees at the same time as many students and parents in UK are funnelling their aspirations down to specific vocational undergraduate studies. Recently I received an inspirational LinkedIn message from an ex-client now studying Liberal Arts in Amsterdam. Having started her degree in Biology, she is now majoring in political science and international relations and commented that *"because of the liberal arts system I've finally been able to figure out what I want to do in life and what I'm passionate about"*.

And then the landscape gets even more fragmented...

Options at 18 now also extend to an increasingly diverse range of employer-university partnership schemes, salaried school-leaver programmes, Higher Apprenticeships, other post-A Level apprenticeship schemes not to mention the opportunity to apply for apprenticeships in Germany and the extensive range of Advanced Level apprenticeships that A Level students frequently take up. I have a list of my 'top 12 websites' for actual vacancy information across this spectrum and follow some on Twitter too.

Then there's the 'hidden' job-market, where 18-year-olds source direct-entry jobs through speculative applications, word of mouth, contacts, family, private agencies or through their part-time job or past work





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experience. Antiquarian bookseller, party organiser and children's TV presenter are just some I have known. Self-employment is an increasingly realistic option too and every year I know of at least one school/college leaver whose first destination is entrepreneurial.

Talking of entrepreneurs, last year I met a second-year Media Technology undergraduate who also ran a small business with his fellow-students, had two part-time jobs and then spent the summer with Camp America. He described his uni experience as “*a degree of many colours*” and it illustrated how the boundary between ‘going to uni or not’ is blurring, as well as how to enhance graduate employability through work experience.

Meanwhile several of my former clients travelled the world as officer cadets with cruise or commercial shipping lines, the armed services are still recruiting and I know others who have become portfolio workers by combining two or more part-time jobs, sometimes alongside or interspersed with part-time study, volunteering or travel.

As for gap years, that's a story in itself! In my experience only about 25% of ‘gap year’ students hold a deferred place at university. Many of the remainder are not even consciously on a gap year, but will at some future point make a UCAS application. I have known students who took six years out before eventually taking up a uni place.

“Why isn't anybody telling us about all this?”

I have always been passionate about the way destinations information can inform students and stakeholders, especially the destinations of those you won't find on your UCAS status report. A first destinations survey that just lists your university entrants interspersed with ‘Employment’ and ‘Gap Year’ is missing the point in my book, as is marketing your school/college purely by the proportion that go to Russell Group universities.

Having said all this, something that's been worrying me is that I might be helping to encourage a drift away from UK university education. But recent conversations with two university outreach officers reassured me, when they both said how vital they perceived it that students consider ALL their options before committing. I was reassured even more after helping a private client who is seven months into her A Levels. We discussed my post-18 menu in depth and at the end I could sense she felt empowered. She told me how lots of students she knew wanted to be doctors or lawyers, or were being pushed into wanting to be doctors or lawyers, whereas she now felt a sense of liberation. What especially impacted on me was when she said: “*Why isn't anybody telling us about all this?*”

Alan's top 12 sites for checking out ACTUAL school/college-leaver vacancies and schemes currently include the following, although they frequently change:

apprenticeships.org.uk
apprenticeshipguide.co.uk
notgoingtouni.com
unisnotforme.com
directions.org.uk
lawcareers.net
allaboutcareers.com
future-talent.com
thebigchoice.com
schoolleaverjobs.co.uk
icaewjobs.com
myjobs.cimaglobal

Other sector-specific sites like lantra.co.uk/jobs and

jobs.nhs.uk are close to being on the list and worth exploring too!

Speculatively checking out the careers page of specific company websites is also a mine of information.

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