

Life-wide learning and a more complete education: an employer's perspective

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Background

As a graduate in the early 1990s, I had little firm idea about 'the next steps' or the skills that would be required to be able to take them. I suspect that I was not alone in still believing that one of the national sporting teams might still come calling and that everything would work out fine. As it was, my sporting chance only came in a part-time job in the commentary box and I emerged from University to a recessionary environment with uncertain job prospects.

I have no doubt, though, that my University experience helped me face the challenges – although it was more the general life skills than the academic that proved most valuable. The early part of the decade shaped me as a person, learning to cope with new challenges, dealing with rejection, combining full time work and study, commuting, not to mention preparing for the exciting but daunting prospect of wedlock. I suspect that I began an inexorable journey towards a future revolving around developing others (with the notable exception of the domestic front where my wife had to do more than her fair share of developing). The commentary box was replaced by the professional platform to express myself on matters of career development, life decisions, personal priorities, all in the context of knowing that the economy can go down as well as up. This paper reflects on my views and experiences from an employer's perspective.

The current environment

There is an argument that the impact of the current recession and the increasing cost of students going to University is leading to a more sophisticated approach to decision making by those emerging from the UK secondary education system. Certainly a good deal more sophisticated than my own two decades earlier, where the provision of a grant, please forgive the pun, was taken for granted. If higher education is going to lead to a significant amount of debt then:

- a) it is critical to properly evaluate whether it is beneficial to go on with formal education; and
- b) if it is, then which subject(s) and which types of experiences are likely to contribute to subsequent success.

With all due respect to teenagers, and hoping to avoid any risk of being accused of ageism, these are quite grown up decisions for people whose experiences are inevitably limited. Indeed the primary and secondary education system is pretty regimented and doesn't allow wildly different early education journeys for people, albeit that there will always be different attitudes, outcomes and levels of enjoyment. And, of course, the consistency of curriculum far from

guarantees an equal educational start in life – fee paying schools appear to be maintaining numbers in spite of the economic downturn, such is the perceived difference from offspring having access to the best facilities, highest quality teachers and/or lofty position in a league table.

In making the grown up decisions that follow secondary education, there will always be reference to other people who might be able to help plug the experience gap. For some the lack of focus, motivation, carrot or stick may well have limited their choice, for others the achievement of multiple A grades may not be as distinguishing a feature as it was in days gone by. All still have options and there remains no obvious route for many. Inevitably parents will be a major influence – some may try to exert undue pressure ‘knowing what is best for their offspring’, others may be absent, reflecting society’s change and the apparent breakdown of the family unit in comparison to previous generations.

The irony is that the recession has brought back into sharp focus some of the tried and tested ways of operating and shown the value of experience. The apparent desire to grow up quickly and operate in short term time horizons have been questioned with many concluding that slowing things down and building solid foundations for the future will yield benefits to employers and employees alike. As an employer, who has double the life experience (at least in years) of those facing the decision about whether to go to University and what to study, there is a tendency to offer advice with the benefit of hindsight and considerable bias from personal experience.

My advice is very often based on the maturity of a person. Almost irrespective of the longer term considerations, for me higher education offers the chance to *grow up as a person* – managing without mum and dad, organising practicalities such as accommodation and washing, developing the discipline to achieve goals with less formal structure in place, to meet and relate to people from different backgrounds, cultures, sex and age. As for what to study if University is indeed the choice, vocational routes apart, the leaning is towards subjects which people are good at and enjoy. This tends to breed a desire for further learning which is absolutely crucial as there is never a point where there is nothing left to learn.

In 2010, there is a somewhat unexpected phenomenon amongst young women, an increasing proportion of whom have grown up not only with a working mother but one who has ambitiously pursued a successful professional career. Whilst some still see the remnants of a glass ceiling blocking universal female success and strive to climb the rungs of the ladder not reached by the previous generation, others comment on the value of a stable domestic front for children to be nurtured in and aspire to a family environment with only one full time working parent, albeit that this could go either way rather than fall by default to the mother. There is also the unwelcome knowledge that the retirement age is rising and for current undergraduates there is the prospect of ceasing to work only when a 7 appears at the start of their age. The benefit of a University education and experience looks all the more appealing with such a long time ahead in the employment market.

The role for higher education

Those in higher education have an admirable desire to meet the multiple needs of their stakeholders – students, employers, government, their own staff, to name just a few. It is an unenviable task to reconcile all these needs and succeed in meeting as many as possible without completely alienating others. It is beneficial to learn from the past, to speculate on the future as well as consider the present. Increased opportunity for work experience, professional work placement, employer skills and career presentations are all positive steps. But we cannot expect graduates to emerge as fully developed, all singing and dancing figures who can perform in the workplace right from the outset. It is unrealistic and really quite unhelpful. Many employers like to have access to graduates who have good potential in order to make their own mark on such individuals to enthuse them with their own goals, structure and culture.

Hence firms like PKF (UK) LLP who train accountants bias their graduate intake away from those that have taken a degree in the subject or something closely related. It is in part due to the difference between the theory of some degrees and the practice of the workplace and the historic professional exam record which seems to suggest that relevant graduates have an excessive view on their advantage over others and find the initial gap closed quickly and the momentum of enthusiastic graduates from other disciplinary backgrounds hard to stay with. It is also, though, the

nature of our work. As an audit trainee, for example, you visit a variety of organisations and the chief requirement is being able to understand the business. This allows the risks affecting the businesses to be better grasped, the relationship with the clients to be more effective and the overall outcome to achieve maximum value and be executed as efficiently as possible. Simplistically, a student with a science background, for example, providing a financial professional service to a scientific organisation might be better placed to achieve this than someone with a relevant accountancy degree to their name. Graduates generally also have an advantage here over school leavers as the commercial awareness, often borne simply from personal experiences as an undergraduate, is stronger.

Higher education is encouraging and recognising more experiential learning – giving students the opportunity to complement their academic studies with formally assessed extra curricular activities. This appeals to employers. Not only do we find more rounded individuals, capable of relating to a variety of people and situations, willing and able to multi task, to manage the scarce resource of time, we also find people who are appreciative of their opportunities. Furthermore we have a reliable assessment that validates references on the cv which all too often can be a generous stretch of the real experience.

The 'ideal' graduate

Unhelpful as it may be to conclude this, there really is no such thing as the perfect graduate. Graduates have different desired outcomes, which may include employment, postgraduate education, travel, and therefore they will aspire to have the appropriate skill set and experience to match. Perhaps the one unifying characteristic for successful onward progression is *aptitude*. A positive mindset to give 100% to whatever is put before them, a willingness to be prepared to step outside the comfort zone, an acceptance that others may be different but make contributions in their own varying ways. As an employer we can train and develop on the academic side, practical experience will bring on proficiency, but it is hard to engender a willingness to start early/finish late/go somewhere unglamorous at short notice without having to throw in financial inducements, time off in lieu, or witness a begrudging reaction from someone who knows that ultimately they may well have to do it whether they want to or not. And yet the positive volunteer in this unappetising scenario will be the first one you turn to when the fantastic opportunity presents itself at some point in the future.

Eamonn Martin, the last British male winner of the London marathon in 1993, was asked just before the 2010 race whether a British man would ever win it again. His answer resonates with a number of reflections in this paper, albeit from an athletic perspective;

“Yes, but not in the immediate future. There's been a whole change of approach to life here. I don't see the same work ethic. I coach runners but I don't find them as willing to do the work, to run the miles. The modern lifestyle is against working long-term for success. Everything's about wanting it tomorrow. The talent pool is still there but not the willingness to dedicate to the long term.”

Higher education has a crucial role to play in ensuring that students do consider the longer term both in their mental and physical approach to learning. A focus on more distant outcomes allows a clearer picture to be seen, setbacks along the way to be viewed as inconvenient but not a total destruction of hope, the realisation that putting yourself forward, trying new things and showing commitment will all have their reward tomorrow if not today. You make your own luck in life through the things you do and the way you do them.

Mature versus 'immature' graduates

In reflecting on the content thus far, it occurs to me that there is a question over the comparison between graduates who emerge less than 5 years after finishing their formal secondary education and those who might have gone to University at a later stage in life. If some of the life skills that are almost necessarily absent from the younger graduates can be found in those that enter or return to University after experiencing life in 'the real world', are they a better graduate from an employer perspective?

Well the answer may vary from employer to employer but in most cases is probably yes and no! Yes, they have perhaps seen enough to allow better quality decision making on their career and have the desire and skills to pursue it more earnestly. They may also have more experience and expertise. But no in that the raw 'raw material' doesn't exist in the same way as for a younger graduate recruit (making a sweeping generalisation). The extra maturity brings with it greater context, expectation and potentially a few bad habits which are harder to cure than the moulding approach adopted for those without pre-conceptions.

Final thoughts

As graduates progress and develop careers a whole host of life factors influence their behaviour. Responsibilities tend to increase – marriage, mortgage, children – looking at these things in their traditional sense and order. Suddenly overseas trips and the willingness to stay late to make the positive impression become less appealing, evenings out with friends become more difficult (but precious) and the view over your shoulder at younger people and their education starts to look like the one your parents had and frighteningly you begin to sound very similar when reflecting.

But the graduate background helps to accept the continual learning derived from operating your life. You have a track record of dealing with new and different challenges being thrown at you and these keep you fresh and interested, much though you might bemoan the absence of 'a quiet life'.

It is rare to find a career spanning more than 10 years that has followed a path consistent with many others. People find themselves having different relative strengths and weaknesses, varying opportunities, different attitudes to risk, alongside different and changing personal priorities. Higher education generally equips them with a wider network of people to consult with, a capacity to make difficult but important decisions and experience from having done some things that with hindsight they probably shouldn't have. The track record which shows a 'wrong' choice made somewhere along the way, generally helps improve decision making subsequently. It is also not uncommon to find that there has been more than the occasional little bit of luck and the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time.

To summarise, it is experience that counts and that cannot be taught or bought. Higher education, however, cultivates an attitude that allows individuals to embrace the multiple challenges of work and life and see them as an opportunity rather than a threat. Ironically, it mustn't try too hard, though, as the more well organised the provision of learning, the bigger the shock on entry to the workplace where order isn't always there, change is an ever present and the ability to think for yourself is very often a significant differentiator.

Ultimately, perhaps this is perhaps the real added value of a higher education that seeks to encourage students to recognise and value the learning and personal development they gain from of their own life-wide experiences. Learning to juggle, balance and prioritise the many competing demands and experiences that make up a university experience is the best preparation for the rest of your life.