

High-achieving students sailing through life without a degree

There is a new breed of high-achieving students who are spurning university in favour of work. Why?

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Katy Pascoe is learning to build ocean-going yachts at Pendennis Shipyard in Falmouth. Photograph: Jim Wileman

Jamie Ponting, 19, worked 25 hours a week at his local supermarket and still managed to shine as a finance academy student at Cirencester College: he got four As at A-level, as well as a distinction in his BTec national award in personal and business finance, equivalent to another A-level.

Ponting might seem an obvious candidate for a top university, and indeed, he had a place waiting for him at Bath.

So why did he go straight from FE college into the world of work?

"Originally, I was going to go to university," he explains. "But having done a six-week internship [at Capita in Swindon] the summer before my final year at college, and been getting money and enjoying it, I thought, really, did I want £30K of debt?"

Ponting is one of a new breed of high-achieving students who have looked hard at what higher education has to offer and decided that the innovative new courses available at their local further education college are plenty good enough.

Cirencester College says it is offering students an alternative to university by fast-tracking them through employer-led academy programmes – affiliated to Career Academies UK, which works with over 120 colleges and schools to support young people who want to pursue business careers.

The finance academy that Ponting graduated from involves not only a stretching

academic programme equivalent to three A-levels, but also a paid internship, personal mentoring and visits and talks from local companies.

Other subjects available through academy programmes include business, IT, law, marketing and engineering.

Cirencester College's vice-principal, Desna McCall, says that while all academy students gain qualifications that can open the door to university, "they are also highly sought after by the companies that have invested in employing them for their internships and, as a result, had the opportunity to experience first-hand their dedication and enthusiasm.

"In many cases, this results in them being offered excellent jobs with career progression and training built in."

And so it proves. Ponting was offered a job straight out of college in the business assurance team at local financial services company St James's Place Wealth Management, and says he doesn't feel he's missed out on the experience of university at all. Around half of his friends have chosen not to go on to university, so his social life hasn't suffered, particularly as he now has the salary to afford one.

However, a degree is a prerequisite in order to apply for certain jobs, so what if his finance academy qualification isn't enough as his career develops?

"I thought, there's nothing stopping me from studying while I'm working," he says.

Add to this the fact that when he joined his team, "one of them had a degree and was doing exactly the same job as me," and the rationale for investing three years and acquiring a heap of debt in order to get a degree starts to look distinctly shaky.

The latest figures from the Higher Education Careers Services Unit show that graduate unemployment increased by 44% in the year to November 2009 – so if high-achieving non-graduates are now able to get the same type of job as those who have a degree, why is higher education still seen as the be-all and end-all?

Parental aspirations and pressure from teachers could be part of the reason, if a survey by student advice website www.notgoingtouni.co.uk is to be believed.

Nearly three-quarters of 1,180 A-level pupils surveyed by the site said they felt going to university was viewed as a necessity rather than a choice. Over half said that parents contributed to this feeling, while a fifth said pressure from school was to blame.

In a further survey of university students carried out by the same site, it appears that two-thirds don't believe they will find work relating to their degree, and one in four feel that on-the-job training or an apprenticeship would have served them better in building a career in their chosen field.

"The statistics indicate that the majority of parents and teachers are still unaware just how beneficial vocational training can be to students and jobseekers," says Craig Abraham, business development manager at www.notgoingtouni.co.uk. "There seems to be a certain snobbery surrounding apprenticeships, where perhaps parents wouldn't be as proud to boast that their child is doing anything other than going to university."

For some parents, it's particularly hard to watch a brilliant child give up the chance of a university place. "My dad really wanted me to go to uni – I'd have been the first in

my family," says Katy Pascoe, 20, who had offers from all six universities to which she applied.

Instead, she's now three-quarters of the way through a four-year apprenticeship at Pendennis Shipyard in Falmouth, learning to build ocean-going yachts.

"I took a gap year and met loads of people who hadn't gone to university and had amazing jobs," she explains. "That made me question what I'd do with a language degree when I didn't want to be a translator."

Pascoe says her school's clear expectation was that students went straight into higher education – "at our careers day it was either uni or the armed forces!" – so it was only a chance sighting of an advert in her local paper asking, "do you want to be paid to sail the world?" that opened her eyes to the possibilities an apprenticeship could offer.

For someone of her academic ability, though, is an apprenticeship, even at NVQ 3 level, really stretching enough?

Getting her head around completely new skills – welding, mechanics, engineering, electrical studies – has been very hard work, she says. Furniture-making, however, is where she's found her niche; though it's clearly a practical skill, there are considerable technical elements to master.

In addition, she points out, every term-time morning of her first year was spent in the classroom at Cornwall College, Camborne, learning the theory behind her practical sessions.

Students on vocational courses should not expect an easy ride, confirms Colin Hindmarch, principal of Harlow College in Essex. "We don't expect our vocational students to work any less hard than our A-level students," he says, "and we have 1,000 people following BTec national awards, which have the same entry requirements as A-levels."

Pascoe pays no fees to train for her apprenticeship, and though she's only earning the minimum wage as she spends her last year specialising in furniture-building, it's enough, just, to keep her out of debt.

Plus, she says, she has "really great prospects" at the shipyard if she completes her apprenticeship successfully.

But are students with the ability to get a good degree closing off future career options if they choose a lower level of qualification?

"That depends, because of course the option of going to university never goes away," says Hindmarch. "We have a lot of bright, intelligent people who come to college who just don't feel ready to do a degree. And a large number of those who make that decision initially do go on to university later."

Apart from a degree itself, Hindmarch says that he believes the most beneficial aspect of going to university is the chance to live independently away from home. But, he points out, going to university is not the only way to have that experience.

"There is another benefit to university of course, which is the intellectual development that takes place through studying an academic subject in depth.

"Not the specific things you learn, but the rigour and discipline that doing a degree

develops.

"That, too, you can get in other ways: if you have a job that makes those demands, for instance. You have to work out the best route for each individual person."

In furniture-making, it seems, Pascoe has found a passion that will drive her for some time to come.

"I'd love to go to uni at some point in the future," she says. "But I didn't see the point of committing that much time if I didn't know what I was doing it for, and given the current job situation for graduates."