

Vocational learning has stepped up a gear

Schools must keep pace with the increasing options available to school-leavers' says Mark Mortimer, Head of Bryanston School, Dorset...

The Bryanston motto, 'et nova et vetera', means to embrace the old and the new. This is exactly what pupils should be able to choose between: the conventional university pathway or credible and respected vocational apprenticeship programmes.

It is vital for every school to flex and adjust whilst reflecting the constantly moving sands of perceptions and values. Nowhere is this more important than when it comes to preparing pupils for the next stage in their education. Today's school-leavers have far more opportunities and choice than their predecessors, and the onus is on every school to help inspire and encourage each pupil to choose the best path that will help them to fulfil their aspirations. That could be a traditional university placement here in the UK, an overseas scholarship or an ever-growing number of vocational options. The current resurgence and increasing appeal of apprenticeships is a particularly significant development.

The history of apprenticeships are rooted within the medieval craft guilds of the Middle Ages. This enabled well-to-do parents to send

their children away to live with a master craftsman, who would then train the apprentice over several years – an average of 7 – in return for a fee. Everyone benefitted and it was seen as a respectable, desirable and aspirational career path.

Apprenticeships in skilled trades such as the construction industry, thatching or engineering have never gone away, although they have been overshadowed in recent years by the significant increase in school-leavers going onto university. With such a high number of students having a good set of A Levels or a university degree, such qualifications are no longer the cast-iron guarantor of success they once were. Employers are now looking for much more, as are many parents and many young people.

Another factor is the welcome rehabilitation of the phrase 'vocational training'. After all, teaching itself is a highly skilled vocational profession. For too long, too many parents have supported the idea of vocational training, while simultaneously thinking, 'just not for my child'. It is great to see this mindset is beginning to shift. However, the responsibility is still on schools to ensure parental perceptions and expectations are fully aligned with the respective benefits of the various options now available to their child. Likewise, there is still some way to go to ensure all pupils are well informed about the viability and relevance of increasingly diverse apprenticeship pathways and have easy access to up-to-date information so they can make informed decisions.

Of course, the appeal of universities remains strong. Indeed, many are adapting and adjusting their service provision to cover both degree and non-degree apprenticeships. There are clear signs, however, that the number of pupils who go straight from school to university to study the traditional 3 or 4 year course is beginning to fall.

A number of blue-chip companies are also offering degree apprenticeships, with the most capable and impressive sixth formers their key targets. A growing number of young people are attracted by the chance to work for a world-renowned organisation, gain experience alongside qualifications whilst getting paid at the same time. This route also side-steps student debt. It is an attractive proposition.

There is a significant amount of evidence that supports the benefits of experiential (i.e. on the job), learning. Just consider the merits of working hard, trying something difficult and failing in a non-threatening environment, mentoring and advice from more experienced colleagues, the chance to use one's initiative and the opportunity to be immersed in the company's culture.

A recent Head of School at Bryanston is now in his second year with JP Morgan doing exactly that – getting work experience, a salary and also a degree from Exeter University. Likewise, another pupil who left in the summer of 2021 has recently started at the Dyson Institute. The benefits to both, as they see them, are similar. As a result, they are getting a head start in a prestigious work environment and gaining the



Mark Mortimer, Head of Bryanston School

skills and experience needed for employment in the competitive workplace.

Traditional university courses will remain an attractive and sensible route for many school-leavers for the foreseeable future. Understandably, I would always argue for the importance of academic pursuit; to expand knowledge, understanding, and creative thought at university. However, degree apprenticeships are forging credible pathways to match the educational value of universities.

The growing recognition of the renewed importance of vocational training both at school (for example the IB careers-related programme) and beyond is a very welcome development. Ultimately, our country needs people who are highly skilled and competent in a wide range of areas. The crucial thing for schools is to help each pupil to navigate both traditional and new options to identify what is right for them in order to support them in their aspiration.

"Et nova et vetera".

"More needs to be done" – UCAS

Insight published by UCAS indicates that over half of students looking to apply to higher education in 2022 are interested in apprenticeships, but find it difficult to access the relevant information that they need about them.

A third of students at schools and only half in colleges said that they were not told about apprenticeships, despite there being a legal requirement placed on schools to do so, known as the Baker clause in England.

The research highlights that more needs to be done to highlight the benefits of apprenticeships – only 8% of students surveyed associated apprenticeships with leading to a good job. An apprenticeship offers

on-the-job training and is a great path to a good career in a variety of sectors, yet only 4% of students associate the word 'prestigious' with apprenticeships compared with 76% for a traditional university degree.

This research provides an opportunity to better explain what an apprenticeship is and UCAS is currently working on plans to bolster its offer for would-be apprentices, aligning with its services for prospective undergraduates.

UCAS intends to take a key role in the progression of the recently published Skills and Post-16 Education Bill through Parliament. Ensuring the wealth of information on ucas.com about all the different pathways available is more accessible, so that students can make informed choices, is crucial and UCAS is working hard to deliver this over the next 12-months.



Pictured: Cameron Robertson, a former Head of School at Bryanston is now in his second year with JP Morgan – getting work experience, a salary and also a degree from Exeter University