

Does a degree really set you up for life?

Phil Hogan

- 1 In the haste to bundle one's difficult teenagers off to university, it can easily slip your mind to ask them if they actually want to go. For those of us who have suffered the earache of marching our children at gunpoint through A-levels, this doesn't seem the time to entertain doubts that they might be unsuited to an academic environment. They have to go, and that's it. What else is there?
- 2 I used to warn my eldest son – who is still recovering from his freshers' fortnight – that the choice was swotting for exams or wasting his life in a dead-end job. The joke of course is that there aren't enough dead-end jobs to go round. When I left school at 16 in the early Seventies, our town offered a variety of unskilled employment – the sauce factory, the dyeworks, the bins – while three O-levels could get you a job as the managing director of the Yorkshire Bank. No one knew anyone with a degree.
- 3 We don't have factories now, and Britain has long been banging the drum for the benefits of hard study. Today there are twice as many 25-year-olds with degrees than there were 18-year-olds with A-levels in the Sixties. Even I have a degree, having gone back to school in the Eighties as a 'mature' student of 27. Higher education took an exciting turn in 1993 when the polytechnics were transformed into universities, gathering speed in 2000 when Tony Blair declared his aim of turning half of all under-30s into graduates by 2010. Would under-achievers from poorer backgrounds be lured by the promise of lifetime earnings at £400,000 above those without degrees? Perhaps 50 per cent seemed possible then, with the figure already at 39.2 per cent, but by last year it had only crept up to 39.8. The ambition remains though. The new higher education minister, David Lammy, says: 'Labour has been working tirelessly to raise aspirations in communities like mine in Tottenham, where not many young people grow up thinking university is for them. Our hard work is paying off – over 50 per cent of young people from every social class say they want to go to university. So our target is a way of showing our determination to make their dreams a reality. The Tories think the trouble with higher education is that too many of other people's kids go to university these days.'
- 4 And they do – there are three times more students today (about 2.4m) than in the early Eighties, though snipers are quick to point out that many of them are attracted to golf studies and surfing theory. 39, in the 19th century they made the same jibes about history, but it is the sort of thing that gets people wondering whether the race to 'widen participation' is such a great idea.
- 5 40. Students – fearful of piling up debt and ending up with a 'McJob' – complain about poor standards of teaching, tutors complain about poor standards of student literacy, and everybody else complains about the gold standard of A-levels turning into chocolate coins, and that what Britain really needs is more plumbers. Which is true. And not just plumbers. Many talented school leavers are waving goodbye to academia and diving straight into hands-on training or setting up in business, helped by energetic charitable foundations

such as Young Enterprise and Edge, whose chairman Gary Hawkes says: 'Our work to combat the perception that vocational and practical learning is a second-class option is crucial to the well-being of our future generations, and to our country's economic vitality.'

6 For those less bullish about their motor skills and entrepreneurial talents, university is still the place to spend your A-levels – somewhere to turn raw, binge-drinking *joie de vivre* into something noble and fine. Many would add 'marketable' to that, though I am still glued to the idea of education for the adventure of it, on the grounds that thinking long and hard for three years, even about surfing, might teach you how to think in general. And where better to grow up, smoke, learn to cook and contract an unpleasant disease more than 100 miles from home? As Prof Edward Acton, provice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia, says: 'Going to university is the fastest, most agreeable way to gain confidence. A society rich in critically-thinking graduates is best equipped to build and sustain the good life.'

7 Yet all is not well. The drop-out rate is 22 per cent, despite the government pumping £800m into schemes designed to plug the leak. For these escapees (they are more likely to be at Bolton and Sunderland than Oxford or Cambridge), something has gone wrong. And current job prospects are not great, with traineeships dwindling, recruitment moribund, banking in tatters. Where, you ask, is your £400,000 coming from? Where do you go from here? Back to your parents' house? No one wants that.

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Tekst 9 Does a degree really set you up for life?

- 1p 36 Why does the writer remark on the fact that even he has a degree (paragraph 3)?
- A As a grown-up he had to go to great trouble to obtain a degree.
 - B As a youngster he was only too happy to leave school and start working.
 - C In his youth the option to go to university was not self-evident.
- “The ambition remains though.” (halverwege alinea 3)
- 1p 37 Wat hield deze ambitie precies in?
- 1p 38 Which of the following characterises paragraph 3?
- A It describes developments which have led to a massive increase in university graduates.
 - B It discusses the government’s efforts to make a university education financially rewarding.
 - C It implicitly criticises the government’s false promises to raise the level of graduates to 50 per cent of all under-30s.
 - D It makes clear that the majority of students have a financial motive for getting a degree.
- 1p 39 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 4?
- A Amazingly enough
 - B Paradoxically
 - C To be fair
 - D What’s more
- 1p 40 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 5?
- A History repeats itself
 - B It is blown out of proportion
 - C It is vexed at all ends
 - D Time is money
- 2p 41 Bepaal op grond van de alinea’s 5 en 6 voor elk van de onderstaande meningen aan wie deze toegeschreven moet worden: Gary Hawkes, Edward Acton, Phil Hogan, of geen van deze drie personen.
- 1 A university education stimulates personal development.
 - 2 Going to university increases one’s job prospects.
 - 3 Learning by doing can be just as rewarding as academic learning.
 - 4 University life is only suitable for those who are aware of its dangers.
- Noteer het nummer van elke mening, gevolgd door een of twee van de drie bovenstaande namen, of door “geen van de drie”.
- Let op: het is dus mogelijk dat een mening aan twee personen toegeschreven kan worden.*

Bronvermelding

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