

Going to University, or Not?

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, AUG 9 2015

August is a big month for school leavers in the UK (and in a lot of other places). Students get their A-level results (or similar) and then almost half of them embark onto a university degree. This is a very exciting time for those students, but also one that often leaves them disoriented.

Going to university has become something of a dominant process in UK schools. The application cycle opens in the early Autumn – with final year students making their initial enquiries and attending open days often a year or more before they leave school. Parents add pressure. Teachers add pressure. At the centre of it is a young person who needs to make a very big decision – one that comes with complicated paperwork and arrangements all on top of the actual primary act of studying for and succeeding in tough exams (!).

It is a daunting and relentless ride, and there is very little time to let any of it sink in before you find yourself in a new city, living on your own, with new joys and new pressures to deal with. And, no one to shout at you to get out of bed in the morning! It is no wonder, then, that a portion of students find themselves in the wrong place, or the wrong degree scheme, come their first winter away from home. In addition, an ever rising number of students report mental health issues that are not often helped by any of the above factors.

The good news is that doing a degree *is* worth it. You raise your chances of stable employment, raise your chance of earning a good wage, get onto a good career path, and (although it may seem trite in this goal oriented world) you become a better person in so many ways. So, if possible, do it! If you don't believe me, I'm sure Bill Gates (one of the world's richest people) will convince you.

All that being said, do not be afraid or ashamed to pause the process. When you are 18 years old everything seems so urgent and pressing. Your friends are all doing X and Y and Z and you don't want to feel 'left behind'. It's hard – but put yourself aside from that process and if you need some time out, take it.

To reflect on my own experience: I ended up doing a degree aged 18 when I left school. By the third month had realised it was wrong for me. I 'dropped out' (as we say in the UK) and got a job. After a few years working (gaining skills/experiences etc.) I decided it was time to give university another shot – but this time I was ready. Fast forward to today, I'm an academic with a degree, a masters, and a PhD. Pausing the process, and even dropping out, has not harmed me at all. It made me a better student, and (I hope) it makes me a better academic. Others who do not go directly to university may find that their time in work is rewarding enough for them to not want/need university education. All the better that they didn't waste 3 years and a lot of money doing so then.

For those of you who feel disoriented or discomfort with the process unfolding around you, starting a degree when you are a few years older, even a good few years older, is not a problem. Every academic knows that the mature students are often some of the best ones! Take your time.

I often joke with some colleagues that mandatory 'gap years' should be enforced in the UK so that students can reflect on their paths. That might not be politically possible but think of it like this: You will probably be working for the rest of your life, so make sure that the precious few years you spend in university are at a time when you can really enjoy it.

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