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Young People in Britain: Alternatives to Higher Education Elena Fell^{a*}, Anthony Fell^b, Natalia Lukianova^{a,c}

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Abstract

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In Britain, the wellbeing of young people is often linked to the education they receive, and going to university in order to obtain an undergraduate degree is seen as a necessary and desirable step in life, which should secure their employability and financial future. However, high university fees and student accommodation and subsistence costs are not normally covered by government grants anymore, so a young graduate is destined to begin his or her professional life with tens of thousands of pounds of student debt, which he or she is expected to pay over three decades of their working life. Although the demand for university places remains as high as ever, it becomes questionable in some situations, whether pursuing a university education at all cost is, in fact, beneficial for a young person and his or her future. This paper explores an alternative path for a young person's successful career – apprenticeship and traineeship, giving a detailed account of a registered gas engineer training route as an example.

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1. Introduction

University applications in Britain reach record levels, with more than 592,000 people having submitted their applications by January 2015, which constitutes a 2% rise compared with January 2014 (Coughlan, 2015) despite the introduction of £9000 per year tuition fees in 2012. Obtaining a university degree is a symbol of aspiration and people are willing to pay for it believing that going to university is undoubtedly going to improve their lives. Nevertheless the figures show that '[s]tudents from poor backgrounds in England will leave university graduating with debts of up to £53,000' (ITV Report,

2015). The report refers to those families that will be unable to support financially their children during their time at university after maintenance grants are abolished.

Former students are expected to start repaying their university debt if they earn at least £21,000 a year. Young people apply to do university courses with the hope of having a spectacular career afterwards and earning a lot more than £21,000 per year within a few years of graduation. However, it is expected that '[o]nly one in four graduates will pay back the full cost of their tuition fees' (Brady, 2010).

Indeed, those young people who pursue careers in such areas as medicine, dentistry, law and engineering have successful careers, but there are many of those graduates who, after the euphoria of their university success expires, find themselves employed in non-professional jobs, unemployed or, worst of all, unemployable.

The policy of widening the participation of young people in higher education created situations when some universities' entry criteria have become very low. Some new universities did not require any qualifications at all, and offered easy subjects to match some students' inadequate level of prior education.

Media studies are known to be a popular subject for those young people who would not be able to manage a more challenging course but still want the prestige and status of being a university student. Universities market degrees in media studies as a gateway into lucrative professions such as producers, directors, photographers and operators of audio, visual and broadcasting equipment. The reality hits media studies graduates after their graduation with only 75.3% finding employment and only 18.6% of those who find work employed in arts, design and media. The rest of those who find work after obtaining a degree in media studies are engaged in retail, catering and bar work (27.7%); marketing, PR and sales (12.9%); secretarial work (11.1%); other jobs (29.7%). None of those roles require a degree, and none pay graduate level salaries (Graduate Prospects Ltd, 2015).

There is a realization that universities are mis-selling degree courses to less able candidates in order to fill places. Whilst doing a university course is an enjoyable and rewarding experience in itself, in certain cases graduates, economically speaking, are no better off than their colleagues who did not go to university (Nelson, 2012). It could be said that young people are currently misled about the economic prosperity that university education supposedly guarantees, and enter into a massive debt following a dream rather than making an informed choice.

In such situations a young person graduates having acquired skills that are not required by employers and eventually does unskilled work – something that he or she could have done after leaving school. Besides, he or she has a huge university debt. Society loses out too – members of the general public complain that there is a chronic shortage of skilled tradesmen such as mechanics, plumbers, gas engineers, electricians. Those young people who are capable of gaining relevant qualifications that the society needs choose to go to university instead, hoping to have a spectacular career and, after graduating, are not able to offer those skills which are actually required in the labour market.

2. Apprenticeships

If a young person's prospects of a successful professional career, following a degree course, are not realistic, he or she can choose an apprenticeship instead. It is also possible to enter a profession as an apprentice who gains new qualification as he or she works. Currently one could look for apprenticeships in Agriculture, horticulture and animal care; Arts, media and publishing; Business, administration and law; Construction, planning and the built environment; Education and training; Engineering and manufacturing technologies; Health, public services and care; Information and communication technology (ICT); Leisure, travel and tourism; Retail and commercial enterprise (GOV.UK, Further education and skills. Apprenticeships).

Apprenticeship is a scheme that combines practical training in a job with relevant study. An apprentice works alongside experienced members of staff and, whilst gaining job-specific skills, he or she earns a wage and gets holiday pay. An apprentice usually takes one day a week off work and studies towards a recognized qualification related to the work that he or she is doing. An apprenticeship lasts from 1 to 4 years (GOV.UK, Further education and skills. Apprenticeships).

Those who are not ready for apprenticeship because they have not reached the required level of competence to do paid work, can do a traineeship first. As a trainee, one gains work experience, but is not paid for the work he or she does.

3. Apprenticeship as an alternative to university

'University isn't always the right choice for young people and apprenticeships and school-leaver programmes offer an important and valuable alternative to those who might feel this way', Sidwell (2014) asserts.

By choosing an apprenticeship a young person does not exclude himself or herself from a professional career – they access a chosen profession via a practical route rather than as a student. This option is suitable for those individuals who want to get into the working world immediately and learn job-related skills directly. This makes apprenticeships an equal alternative to a degree in some cases, and while young graduates face the anxiety of looking for a job in their chosen field, an apprentice already has a job in their chosen field.

There are situations where an apprenticeship route and a university route merge. Some apprenticeship schemes include a foundation degree or a degree as part of the apprenticeship course. A young person who follows such a programme would be able to combine work with a degree course and use new skills at work while he or she is learning.

Details of a current advertisement illustrate the possibility of entering a professional world without embarking on a costly degree program. The company Get Geared based in Surrey advertises a position of Apprentice Web Designer and Developer suitable for someone who has a good understanding of website design. The required qualifications are 'A-C GCSEs or equivalent in Maths and English as well as a relevant qualification or proven personal interest in website design' (GOV.UK. Find an apprenticeship). Someone who is interested in web design may oscillate between doing the two-year apprenticeship or applying for a university degree in media studies, but whilst a degree course would

cost them tens of thousands of pounds, working for Get Geared would pay £385.00 per week as advertised.

4. Training to become Registered Gas Engineer

Apprenticeships in different fields are structured differently and in this example, a gas fitter apprentice must complete 4 stages of training before they can earn their living in this field.

Someone who wishes to become a gas engineer begins his or her training with attending a specialised course at a training centre. Initial training (at Stage One) is adapted to suit the individual's circumstances: some trainees may be complete beginners, some may have relevant industry experience, and gas industry trainers take this into account. Trainees attend the course on a full time or part time basis. The course typically includes various workshops and each trainee attends those workshops that are appropriate to his or her competence level. Despite this flexibility of study, all trainees must complete the mandatory full gas foundation training programme.

Stage Two of the course involves work experience which the trainee carries out working alongside a registered gas engineer and under his or her supervision. This stage is mandatory, but is not easy to complete: it is the trainee's responsibility to find a registered gas engineer and convince them to give the young person a training placement.

Normally, a young person would approach registered gas engineers with applications for training placement. In his letter, he would explain that he is working towards his Gas Safe registration number and needs to complete his portfolio of evidence working alongside an experienced tradesman acting as his mentor.

One of the co-authors is a Registered Gas Engineer registered with Gas Safe who, as a potential employer, could offer training placements to apprentices and receives numerous applications from young people. However, small companies are reluctant to offer placements to outsiders and would normally reserve such opportunities for their own children. This correlates with the tradition to protect one's own trade from newcomers. Large businesses such as British Gas accept applicants, but the competition for placements is very high. Nonetheless a trainee cannot legally progress with their course until this stage is completed.

Stage Three of the gas training course involves Approved Contractor Scheme (ACS) assessment. Approved Contractor Scheme was established by Security Industry Authority in order 'to raise performance standards and to assist the private security industry in developing new opportunities' (Security Industry Authority, Approved Contractor Scheme) and in line with The Private Security Industry Act 2001 which requires the Security Industry Authority to establish a 'system of inspection for providers of security services, under which those organisations who satisfactorily meet the agreed standards may be registered as approved, and may advertise themselves as such' (SIA Approved Contractor Scheme. Standard Definition, 2006).

The trainee undertakes Assessment for his Approved Contractor Scheme Gas Qualifications after completing his portfolio. Assessment includes three examinations (practical, written and verbal) and covers the domestic suite of gas qualifications: Core Gas Safety, Gas Cookers, Gas Fires, Central Heating and Boilers, and Flue gas Analyser.

After the trainee has passed ACS exams, he or she progresses to Stage Four which involves applying to the Gas Safe Register for membership. The membership fee of approximately £500 is paid directly to the Gas Safe Register, and subsequently the gas engineer’s membership is renewed yearly for £85.

ACS gas qualifications expire after five years, so every five years the gas engineer must renew his qualifications by undertaking a reassessment in the training centre (Option Skills, 2011).

5. Conclusion

Being able to secure one’s ability to earn a living is an important criterion of a young person’s wellbeing. With this in view, following a non-academic route into a profession or a trade can be seen as an equal alternative to pursuing a degree. This can be reinforced by comparing average salaries of some graduate professionals and those who received their training via apprenticeship schemes. Whilst certain graduate roles are firmly associated with high income, some may not attract salaries significantly higher than those that do not require a degree.

Table 1. Average yearly salaries in the UK (PayScale, 2015).

Job title	Average yearly salary	Qualifications required
Gas Fitter	£25,868	ACS assessment
Teacher	£27,073	University degree + teacher training
Electrician	£24,616	Apprenticeship
Nurse	£23,038	Nursing degree
Web designer	£22,591	University-level education in web design; could be degree or alternative.
Research Scientist	£29,896	e.g. degree in Analytical Chemistry
General Practitioner	£61,929	Medical degree
Law Firm Partner	£63,924	Law degree

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