

Is a degree the right path for the job that you want?

ASK LOUISA

Work experience is being rated above qualifications, writes **Louisa Peacock**

I DON'T know what degree I want to do and wondered if there are any subjects that are more likely to lead to a job than others? I'm just starting my A-levels in biology, psychology, and English literature.

Laura, via email

You are absolutely right to be asking this question now, Laura, rather than embark on a degree that has no relevance to the world of work. The last thing you want to do after spending three or four years studying is realise your degree has got you no further forward in the search for a decent job and all you are left with is thousands of pounds of student debt.

Employers are increasingly warning that Britain's young people go blindly through the education system achieving academic qualifications and certificates with no regard for how they will be applied in the real world, or what sort of job they want. Thousands of school leavers and graduates will enter the jobs market for the first time this summer, but without real work experience, they will find it difficult to stand out from the rest, experts say.

Research out yesterday by training provider Lifetime found more than half of employers rate work experience and volunteering above academic qualifications. Just 27pc of employers look for degrees compared to 58pc that look for on-the-job experience when recruiting, the survey of 2,000 organisations found.

Your question, Laura, should be not just what degree subject to study, but whether a degree is right at all for the job you want. Britain is still far from

meeting the Government's target of creating 400,000 apprenticeships a year by 2014-15, but large employers in particular are starting to invest more in "earn while you learn" schemes rather than just expect to pick the best of the university degree crop. The next three or four years after your A-levels could be better spent in a relevant, if low-paid, job gaining skills and experience that businesses crave.

According to Fred Turok, founder of youth employment charity TAG, you must take "personal responsibility" for your career at an early stage. He advises you to "think very carefully about your exit strategy" after taking a course, Laura, asking whether it gives you the "necessary skills to become employable".

Yesterday's official unemployment figures showed the number of young people out of work has fallen in the quarter to April, but there are still nearly 900,000 16 to 24 year-olds jobless. Employers are becoming increasingly nervous about hiring, with many admitting they won't hire young people due to a lack of experience.

Of course, it depends on what job you want, and your A-level choices appear to leave this open. If you are interested in a technical or engineering role, many employers would rate a degree in this discipline, although you may have to study a foundation degree first. UCAS's website, wwwucas.ac.uk, lists the entry requirements. Other professions, such as accounting, may well require you to complete professional qualifications but don't necessarily need you to have a degree. The big four accountants all offer their own training schemes for school leavers. It's also worth looking at apprenticeships.org.uk for current vacancies in a range of sectors - not just engineering or technical - including retail and management. A degree is not your only option.

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