

Changing course: second chance to make a first impression

Thousands of students arrive at university every year only to discover that they have chosen the wrong course. But while some drop out, others successfully transfer to other subjects. Paul Redmond explores the hidden world of the course changer.

Bill Gates did it. Steve Jobs did it. Even educated divas Sharon Stone and Andie McDowell did it. Each of them dropped out of university or switched courses before going on to achieve great success.

Hey, even Prince William did it. To the consternation of the art world, the heir to the throne suddenly announced at the end of his second year at St Andrews that for reasons of 'aptitude' he was dropping History of Art and taking up Geography. No more time spent pondering Old Masters. From that day forth, the only 'old masters' William would encounter would be wearing kagools and toting theodolites.

But at least William was not the only one jumping ship. According to the Sunday Times, each year around 18,000 students switch courses or universities. Unlike the prince, however, most of these transactions take place during the first academic year – traditionally a time of fluidity and change.

Trading places

Academics can find this annual game of musical chairs baffling. Why is it that some students appear to glide through university with barely a hitch, while others seem to spend their time slaloming between modules, courses and faculties? Are university application processes too complex? Does the UCAS process kick-in too early in a student's sixth-form education? Are there simply too many courses to choose from?

Fortunately, answers to some of these questions are now becoming available. Several studies have been published recently which offer

a glimpse of higher education from a student's perspective. At last universities are able to appreciate why so many students find the first few months away from home so daunting.

Knowing me, knowing you

Universities know far more about their students than ever before. Partly, they have no choice. Higher education has become a highly competitive, multimillion-pound business – a business dependent on recruiting and retaining students.

And on the whole, British universities are good at looking after students. Almost eight out of ten people that enrol at university in the UK goes on to graduate. This figure is significantly higher than the world average.

British students are also, on the whole, very happy. Not only are the majority pleased with their choice of subject, most are confident that their qualifications will lead to well paid jobs.

This is an important point. Despite complaints from some professors that the government's employability agenda is watering down serious academic study, the hard fact is that most students go to university to get better jobs. And with this in mind, they are prepared to pay for it.

And pay for it they do. Going to university is a costly investment. More than half of students who were questioned in one survey argued that without income from part-time jobs they would be unable to continue with their studies. This explains why between 1996 and 2006 there was a 54 per cent rise in the number of full-time students undertaking paid employment.

Furthermore, it seems that the introduction of variable tuition fees it seems to have little impact on these concerns. Few students, when questioned by researchers from the Higher Education Academy, were apparently aware of the detailed issues surrounding funding or the levels of support available to them in their universities. It seems that worrying about money is still as integral to the student experience as Rag week.

Doing the homework

The more students know about higher education prior to enrolment, the less they seem likely to want to change course or university. Forty per cent of students questioned in one survey admitted to entering university knowing 'little or nothing' about their course or institution. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these soon harboured thoughts of changing course or returning home.

In contrast, students who took the time to find out more about their course, perhaps even paying an early visit to the university, were significantly less likely to want to change. It seems that the better prepared they are for university prior to enrolment, the greater the chances are that students will feel engaged with their studies.

Stick or twist?

But why would anyone commit to something which, by their own admission, they know so little about?

Researchers offer several possible explanations. The first harks back to students' time in sixth form. One of the biggest challenges faced by sixth-formers when undergoing the UCAS application process is where to begin? Universities currently offer 53,500 degree course combinations at over 200 locations. And then there are all the modules to choose from. Faced with this, it is not surprising that many sixth-formers – and their parents - simply opt for the relatively safer option of choosing subjects which they enjoyed at A-level.

For some, this is where the problems begin. Studying a subject at degree-level is often a very

different proposition to studying it at A-level. For a start, students are expected to read around the subject in far more depth and intensity. It is also considerably more time-consuming. Sometimes, choosing a new subject, or a subject tangentially linked to a subject studied at A-level, can be the wisest option to take.

Others are more calculating. Certain degree courses, i.e. Law, are notoriously competitive, with over-subscribed waiting lists and high pre-entry qualifications. Faced with this, it has been claimed that some applicants, are choosing notoriously unpopular courses – courses in which the competition is likely to be thin – then, if accepted, waiting for a few days before requesting an internal transfer to their preferred course. Their rationale is that once term is underway, universities will do their best to accommodate course transferrals rather than lose a source of income.

Admittedly, as far as “stings” go, this one is fairly far fetched. It's also incredibly risky: miscalculate, and instead of gaining a transfer on to the course of your dreams, you end up an academic castaway, marooned for three years on your very own degree course desert island.

This probably explains why “players” such as these are such an exception to the rule. Most students enrol at university in good faith, expecting their courses and universities to be all that they expected them to be when they completed their UCAS forms, which on the whole, is what they are. But despite the support and guidance available at university, for most students the transition from school / sixth form can be a complex and pressurised time: a time of insecurity, change, and anxiety. There's also the small matter of homesickness.

Subterranean homesick blues

Most students feel homesick when first arriving at university. Feeling homesick is a normal part of human psychology, a defence mechanism, an ineluctable feature of human genetic makeup.

Yet for some, homesickness in the first few weeks of term can be almost as debilitating as sea sickness - lurking away beneath the

surface, gnawing at self confidence and warping perceptions. It can also be hard to shake off. Counsellors say that homesickness has a tendency to “ambush” its victims, re-appearing just when they thought they were over it.

Though rarely acknowledged, homesickness is significant in explaining why some students decide to leave or change universities. Every year, homesick students quit to go home. Most leave in the first semester; others simply don't return after the Christmas vacation. Yet few appreciate how momentous the decision to quit really is, not just in terms of their long-term education, but also for future career prospects. But because homesickness vanishes rapidly upon returning home, sizeable numbers find themselves re-applying the following year, often to the same universities.

The five flashpoints

Thanks to research, universities also have a much better understanding of the critical periods in a student's first year, when he or she is most likely to think about changing course or terminating studies. In one study sponsored by Universities UK five “flashpoints” were identified. How students coped during these flashpoints would, it was argued, determine their chances of completing their programme:

- **One!** The first six to eight weeks
Chronic homesickness makes everything seem strange, unfamiliar and scary
- **Two!** The first formal assessment – if no feedback is soon forthcoming. Some students have a tendency to worry that they are not up the grade – lack of feedback only increases these fears
- **Three!** Examination period at the end of the first semester. Poor results may rock an already low self-esteem
- **Four!** The long Christmas break leading up to the first exams. The months after Christmas can be extra gloomy times

for new students: bad weather mixed with impending exams equals low motivation and dreams of escaping

- **Five!** Returning to university after the end of the first summer break. Most students now work during the long summer holidays. Giving up on a regular income can be tough, even for the most dedicated

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from this study is that thinking about changing course, or university, is actually a fairly normal part of being a student, particularly during the early stages of a degree programme. It also reveals how important it is that students prepare to make the most of not only their time in university, but also the long holidays.

What to do if it's not for you

If you are preparing to enter higher education next year, what should you do if you suspect that you are on the wrong course?

Avoid suffering in silence: talk to tutors.

If you are feeling worried about anything related to your course – your timetable, the way you are taught, or the content of the curriculum – don't keep these worries to yourself. Academic and personal tutors are there to help and often will be able to allay your concerns, while also taking note of your issues. Chances are you won't be the only student with those concerns.

Don't let the grass grow under your feet.

If you are going to change subject, the best time to do it is during the first few weeks of the first semester. This is when universities are at their most accommodating; it also means that you won't have to spend much time catching up on missed course work.

Make use of university support services.

Universities today have excellent high quality student support services (usually called “Student Services”). These include a range of experts operating in specialised fields, such as accommodation, counselling, health,

○ disability support, careers services and the university chaplaincy team. Many of these services can be accessed face to face or, increasingly, on-line.

Say goodbye to the folks! Students aren't the only ones who find the transition to university a bewildering and stressful time. As a result, many parents over-compensate by not letting go. Some, if permitted, would gladly accompany their offspring to lectures and tutorials. But though well-meaning, saying goodbye to parents is a big part of going to university. And anyway, you can see them at weekends!

○ **Join in extracurricular activities**
Remember: there are two sides to being at university: curricular and extracurricular. Don't neglect one for the other.

○ **Employers are more flexible than you think** Some students, on arriving at university, become concerned that their degree course will not lead them to "graduate-level" jobs, or jobs in a certain field. While some jobs still demand a certain degree subject (fortunately, dentistry falls into this category), the majority don't. This means that in practice, employers are far more flexible when it comes to choice of subject than many students think. What matters, increasingly, is degree classification, along with possession of a range of "transferable" skills – skills such as leadership and team-working.

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