Apprenticeship or university degree? Why not both?

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the author.

Citation: SAKER, J.M., 2014. Apprenticeship or university degree? Why not both? Automotive Management, October, pp. 34.

Additional Information:
- This paper was accepted for publication in the magazine Automotive Management and appears here with the kind permission of the publisher.

Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/25560](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/25560)

Version: Published

Publisher: Bauer Media

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Apprenticeship or university degree? Why not both?

By Professor Jim Saker

A ny student of business knows there is a fundamental tension between structure and strategy. Business failure is often caused by its structure dictating its strategy, whereas it should be the other way around.

The motor industry is an example of structure and strategy sometimes not being particularly well aligned. Another area where they struggle to co-exist is in education, where the career paths of young people seem to be determined at the age of 16. Anyone born after Sept 1, 1997, now has to stay in some form of education or training until their 18th birthday. The options are:

- Full-time education — e.g. at school or college
- An apprenticeship or traineeship
- Part-time education or training — as well as being employed, self-employed or volunteering for 20 hours or more a week.

There is more than one route to success

The problem is that these are portrayed as being unrelated options. There is a famous sign at the start of a long dirt track road in the outback of Australia, which simply says: “Choose your rut carefully. You may be in it for some time.” To a large extent, the young person is directed to make a choice with little option of switching.

This came to mind when I read Steve Nash’s comments about the IMI and its welcoming of Vince Cable’s support for apprenticeships. AM published an article last month in which the benefits of automotive apprenticeships were quite rightly extolled (am-online.com/apprenticeshipsIMI).

As I have written before in this column, the apprentice schemes offered in our sector are brilliant by comparison to some in other sectors. They are a genuine option for young people and with the right employer can lead to enhanced career development.

My problem is that the discussion is surrounded by statistics that try to make the case for one route over the other based on monetary return in the short run.

For example, the AM article states: “Calculations predict that those who pick vocational training in the motor trade will have earned on average £36,000 to £100,000 more than the academic students by the age of 25.” This is undoubtedly correct, but the figure would not be that different if they had been selling burgers from the age of 16.

Also, by going down the ‘academic route’ there is the issue of student debt. I have no problem with what is being said, but it is a position that polarises the structural problem.

For me, the most significant statement is when the article says the IMI’s ‘own research reveals that 19% of parents would encourage their child to study a vocational programme’. By implication, one assumes that 81% of parents would not encourage their child to take that route.

It is always good if you can find someone to blame. My view is that this dates back when the Thatcher government brought down a binary divide between polytechnics and universities. One of my first jobs was in a polytechnic and it had real strength in delivering trade qualifications, but also allowed people to undertake degrees in applied subjects studying part-time while in work.

When polytechnics moved to become universities, the criteria upon which they were judged changed. They started to appear on league tables competing against Oxford and Cambridge. Structure was determining strategy and, as a result, the ex-polytechnics ended up at the bottom.

Not town versus gown, but both working together

It can be argued that this led to a downgrading of ‘trade and vocational’ qualifications resulting in there appearing to be only two choices – university or apprenticeship.

As I said, apprenticeships, especially the technical ones in our sector, are excellent – the difficulty lies in where they will take the apprentice. Most of the top dealership managers have come through the sales side of the business rather than after sales. This can act as a ‘glass ceiling’ for someone taking the apprenticeship route.

The choice should not be either/or but both. For our industry to progress and develop, we need a more flexible approach that allows the transition from apprenticeships into certificate, diploma and degree qualifications.

The IMI has done a good job in mapping various qualifications into a framework. The challenge is how people progress through this and how organisations support employees’ career development. Despite all the benefits, we still see a reluctance for organisations to invest in their staff.

Our centre at Loughborough has tried to support this development, admitting people from all aspects of the motor industry onto programmes, often based primarily on their business experience.

If we are to make progress, we need to promote both apprenticeships and formal qualifications as a holistic package. It isn’t ‘town versus gown’ – it has to be town and gown working together.

“For our industry to progress and develop, we need a more flexible approach that allows the transition from apprenticeships into certificates, diplomas and degrees”