

Ask not what St Andrews can do for you...

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Having spent four or five years of your life dedicated to further education, you finally gain a degree from St Andrews. What happens next? That is a daunting question for all final year undergraduates. There are many here who feel entitled to a good job after gaining a degree from a university like St Andrews; one that has consistently come in the top five of British university league tables; usually 3rd after Oxbridge.

So, what's the catch? The recent High Flier Research would have us believe that the top 100 UK employers do not actually make it their priority to target St Andrews. That's difficult to stomach, especially with tuition fees at record levels, and this university insisting that their education is worth the £36,000 that most undergrads must now cough up.

It's right to be irritated by these figures; angry even. But it's also important to learn from the lesson that comes with it. No matter where you study, the only real way to find the job of your dreams is to go out there and fight for it. Complacency is never the answer when top employers are concerned. They want young adults who have dedicated their university careers not only towards their subjects, but towards enhancing the societies that they care strongly about; working on something that they believe in.

Paul Brown, head of the Careers Centre, said of the matter: “[Students] have to be desirable in all sorts of ways, academically, and in the amount of work experience they have in order to be a credible, convincing applicant. The individuals who...do this as early as second year, will have their employability profile improved.”



Cartoon: Monica Burns

Of course, the Careers Centre certainly could be doing more. A French & Latin student aptly described their Achilles' heel: if you know what you want to do, then no problem; they can point to the right applications and graduate schemes. If you haven't a clue, however, then good luck to you, "...as someone who is still unsure and was looking to discuss ideas, I think it [the Careers Centre] is pretty useless. I have been a few times this year and left each time unsatisfied at the help I have been offered." A final year psychology student added that complacency seems not just to be a student thing: "I think they perhaps rely too heavily on an online presence – even when you have a meeting in person, you'll probably hear 'have you had a look at our website?'"

Paul Brown took the time to describe exactly what the careers advisors are doing to improve St Andrews' employability. When asked what he thought about the High Flier Research, he argued that St Andrews missed out because of its location. When told that Edinburgh, an hour and a half away, had managed to make it, he argued that there were a further two factors in play: "The first is the range of subjects that are on offer here. St Andrews doesn't have a Law course or an Engineering course. Employers look at the subject mix. Also they look at the number of students who are going to graduate each year," he said.

Fair enough. But why don't we get more innovative with the courses on offer? Why, for instance aren't there more modules like the teaching modules currently in place, that allow students with aspirations of becoming teachers to have practical experience? When asked whether there should be more courses like these, Paul Brown affirms: "I'm in a meeting about this issue this afternoon, so it's not as if these things aren't being considered...could it [integrating work experience into full-time study] be improved? Yes."

Students seem to agree that this could be the missing part of the degrees on offer here. These degrees, according to a final year History student, currently conjure up images of “ivory towers”, not practicality as, for example, universities like Manchester or Warwick.

A modern languages student agrees. “I think the purpose of university is changing, and with such high fees, we cannot keep pretending it is solely for the purpose of further learning... it is absolutely appalling that they insist that the majority of their students [in the School of Modern Languages] do a year degree (paying half fees for the year abroad) but do not encourage, nor seek industry connections,” he said.

Paul Brown insists that attitudes are changing. “I can see where your questions are coming from, is the university doing enough? I’ve been here eight years now and there’s been a big shift in attitude, not everywhere, but in many key areas, from an attitude that is probably more in the area that our business is education, not training.”

“Now, however, there is much more sympathy with the fact that students come to university to gain an education and to prepare themselves for working life; therefore this is now part of the university’s mission to prepare students...” Let’s hope that this is the case; in the midst of economic uncertainty, the last thing that St Andrews need is more to worry about.