

The Myth of Perfectionism in Secondary Education

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Perceptions/Misperceptions of university created by schools

- Level of pressure on university rooted in pressure put on GCSEs/A-levels in secondary education
- No room for error
- Students often do not leave the education bubble: never told anything else
- Overriding topics were
 - Pressure on Independence
 - Pressure on applying to university/getting a job
 - Educational perfectionism

Pressures on Independence

When you go to university **you will not get any help**. Get used to working on your own now. It's not like school, **they will not help you** (State)

Get in a good routine now because **it's imperative to doing well at Uni** (Grammar)

I [was told I] **would be given no support with my studies** and to start practising (Private)

Your **Uni will help you become informed** on issues of student loans, housing, the change to independent study and living (Grammar)

...it was more the **lack of information** and the little we were told had **nothing to do with how to live whilst at uni** (State)

I also think **they should have warned us about money**, some people who's parents earn as much as mine do will get the same loan as me (not enough to live on alone) but their parents won't help them out...and those **people have to work double hard to have a job and to study** (State grammar)

Pressure on Independence

- Makes asking for help taboo (academically and personally)
- Familiarity with asking for help and familiarity with help available is key
- School/university workshops in budgeting
- Encourage to ask for help and use office hours
- University is about learning, growing and becoming independent but *not all at the same time*

Pressure on applying for university/getting a job

You **need a good degree to get a job**. There's no leeway for alternative routes or time to be wasted (Grammar)

I needed to **pick a degree any degree** and just go with it, the debt essentially doesn't matter because you'll never have to pay it back but you should do a degree because **that will mean a job** (State)

I just **picked something randomly** with no real thought as to how it would affect my future. Was under a ridiculous amount of pressure from school to **just go to uni** (State)

...what we were told was **go to uni and pick whatever degree** just make sure **that you can get a job** with it but there will probably be 100s of people with the same degree so good luck (State)

My school **made every single person apply to uni** - there was one girl in my year who didn't and she had to really fight for it...We weren't told about any alternative ways of living apart from **the ones that would guarantee a career/money** (State Grammar)

To **get a degree that "employers look for"** as more creative subjects like drama, art etc are useless (Grammar)

In my school **if you didn't [go to university]** you were considered **a failure** (State)

Pressure on applying to university/getting a job

You *have* to go to university to succeed, to secure a future, you have to decide now what you're going to do for the rest of your life, it doesn't matter if you're unsure – the degree is the important thing, if you fail you are a failure; but you're part of a cohort of millions of other people attending university so it might not even guarantee a job, oh and... You have to do it all on your own.

- To succeed in education is to succeed in life
- Meet your schools interests not your own
- Warps the significance of the whole university experience
- Waiting and making assured decisions
- Knock-on effect to motivation and wellbeing

Pressure on grades and educational perfectionism

..constantly being told that the first year of uni/freshers would be so much fun and you make friends really fast (Private)

They just assumed that everyone who went to uni would be perfect in any situation and gave someone like me a pipe dream that maybe when I go to uni all of my life problems will be fixed and I can have a great time... (State)

I was made to feel like I'd missed my grades when I didn't get 10A*; at GCSE Students who received all A* were separated from the rest of the year group, their photographs taken...there was so much expectation for us to get an A* and if we didn't get one we felt we'd failed (Private)

Said we might get kicked out if we didn't go to lectures (Private)

Even at gcse level, teachers told us that at some universities there would be a selection process where any applications with less than a certain number of A*s would simply be put in the bin because they had so many applications (Private)

[on applying to Oxbridge] - Not being an applicant, the minority of us were checked up on a lot less with our university applications and were separated as "non-oxbridge". Made to feel like our applications mattered less (Private)

Pressures on grades and educational perfectionism

- Gifted and talented students separated and treated differently
- Representative of a standard unattainable to others: considered a failure
- Manifests unhealthy work habits
- Complicates stress and self-worth

What they don't tell you at school...

- You can retake modules and exams; extensions; extenuating circumstances
- Fallback in one area can be made up in another
- You can change your degree relatively easily if you're not sure
- You can drop out
- A first is not the only grade
- That going wrong is when we learn best
- You can go/go back to university kind of whenever you want
- Open university, part-time university, or no university
- Waiting is an option: there is life without a degree, and there will still be jobs

What can be done?

- Help, or encourage, every student to celebrate their achievements
- Induction talks: tell students they are not alone, that independent study does not mean isolated study; familiarity with services is key
- Be clear about what is required of students, and what constitutes not-passing their degree – be clear about retakes, opportunities, unit changes, course changes, etc
- Remove 'failure' from language. We are not failing, we are **learning**
- Encourage students to make good decisions within their course regarding unit choices, essay questions, etc.
- 'Hey, this is not your only option, university is not for everyone and it's okay to stop and try something else'
- Acknowledge that university is hard and it's okay to struggle
- Encourage asking for help