EQUANTIIS

Are Universities Relevant to the Students of Today?

Contents

Section 1

Alternatives to University Education

For many years, going to university has been considered the conventional route into enhancing the prospects of a well-paid job.

Throughout my own school years, I was often reminded that obtaining a good university degree was a prerequisite to career success. However, today there are many more opportunities open to prospective applicants other than attending university.

Examples include apprenticeship schemes, digital courses through e-learning platforms such as MOOCs, or even enter the labour market with full-time employment based on the outcomes of one's secondary education.

1.1

APPRENTICESHIPS

What is an Apprenticeship?

An apprenticeship is a work-based training programme that allows students to train on-the-job and study simultaneously whilst getting paid.

Why an Apprenticeship?

In the past, apprenticeships were considered as substandard to attending university, and in some circumstances, students had the perception that apprenticeships were not as highly coveted as degrees. However, the reality is, apprenticeship schemes offer a competitive alternative to university and students have started to realise the true benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship.

Benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship over University
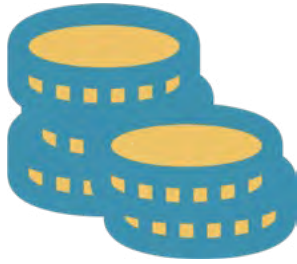
Earn as you learn:

Apprenticeships allow students to learn through a structured training programme whilst also being employed and earning a wage. Studying at university comes with a large annual tuition fee, potential additional living costs; and therefore, may leave students with a substantial debt when they graduate.

Opportunity to study a degree:

Apprentices may have access to higher education through their employer's scheme. This can support suitable candidates being able to obtain a level 6 or 7 certification which is the equivalent of a bachelors' and a masters' degree respectively. This enables students to get into higher-level skilled jobs.

Experience and Knowledge:

Starting off in employment at a young age may be a daunting experience, however in doing so, candidates gain a much better insight into the working world and therefore, may become accustomed to the environment much faster.

Apprentices may also experience practical workplace elements to aid their theoretical knowledge and help them understand concepts better. This will enable them to develop their skills at a younger age affording them the opportunity to progress faster than their graduate peers.

Job Security:

Students completing an apprenticeship will possess the relevant skills and a better understanding of a company culture, and thus, may have opportunity to transition into full-time employment.

If potential students can earn a salary whilst simultaneously learning, all without compromising their progression, is a degree really required?

Examples of Apprenticeship Schemes

Amazon is a great example of a company that continually recognises the value in apprenticeship programmes. In February 2019, they announced the launch of 1,000 UK apprenticeships within their workforce. Additionally, they made available, over 90 bachelor and master-degree level apprenticeships, ranging between thirteen months to four years. The initiative behind creating more apprenticeships was "… to give people opportunities to succeed in the digital age regardless of their background", according to Amazon's UK Chief, Doug Gurr.

If Amazon can create degree related apprenticeships that equip students with the education and necessary skills, alongside getting paid up to £30,000, which is almost identical to the average graduate salary, then is it necessary for students to attend university? Moreover, having an established name like Amazon on your CV could underpin your future job prospects that you may have been unlikely to achieve as a university graduate in the same time frame.

Chartered Institute of Legal Executives (CILEx) is another example of a well-established organisation that encourages apprenticeships in the legal sector.

Previously, studying a law degree at university used to be the only means to become a legal professional. However, CILEx recognised the rigidity within the sector and understood the number of students wanting to enter the industry without the desire to attend university. Therefore, in 2013 CILEx launched an apprenticeship programme allowing students to attain Paralegal and Chartered Legal Executive qualifications.

Completing a CILEx apprenticeship does not limit the apprentice in any way as they can progress into a number of legal roles. The programme is also fully funded, meaning there is no cost to the apprentice - as opposed to graduating from university in debt and then going through the process of gaining a training contract. CILEx has therefore, introduced new pathways to entering the legal sector without the need to attend university.

Apprenticeships work on a simple principle, students earn a salary through working for an organisation, and in exchange they will receive training via a structured learning programme. They will be able to develop their knowledge and industry skills on the job to attain the necessary qualifications they want to achieve.

1.2

ELECTRONIC LEARNING

What is Electronic Learning?

Electronic learning (e-learning) is essentially an educational platform that allows students to study through the use of digital technologies. The idea being that students can remotely access their learning tools from anywhere.

Why use e-learning platforms?

Advancements in technology have fundamentally reshaped the way in which we communicate with one another. Technological developments have penetrated into the education sector in the form of e-learning. Platforms like e-learning, have enabled students to absorb information as effectively as learning on campus. In doing so, learning online is an alternative student experience.

Benefits of e-learning platforms over traditional University teaching methods

Accessible to Everyone:

e-learning tools are widely accessible through the use of the internet, and these platforms are able to attract a much broader audience.

Individuals can study online irrespective of their previous background or educational experiences. Therefore, more than just teenage students can use these tools to better their knowledge. On the other hand, university is a lengthy campus-based commitment that predominantly attracts only one demographic.

Flexibility:

Students can access information 24/7 from anywhere they want. Online platforms offer students greater control over their own learning by enabling them to work at a pace that suits their needs.

This allows the flexibility for students who want to study around their daily schedule.

Cost Effective:

Online courses are considered to be relatively cheaper than attending university. Students who study online can often overlook the additional expenses like accommodation and transportation.

The increasing use of e-learning platforms within the education sector, demonstrates an easily accessible alternative to universities' traditional teaching methods.

Examples of e-learning platforms

Previously, the only way of obtaining a Master of Business Administration (MBA) qualification, was by travelling to a business school and dedicating a few years to completing the qualification. Today however, an MBA programme can be taken anytime and anywhere it suits you. E-learning platforms have enabled people with other commitments to complete an online MBA around their lifestyle and responsibilities.

Amongst several institutions, The University of Iowa recently announced the end of an era for their 160-year-old MBA programme. They decided to terminate this course due to better alternatives entering the market and affecting their student numbers.

Gies College of Business at The University of Illinois, has seen the number of online MBA applications triple since 2016. The main reason for this being the price difference between the two programmes. On average their online MBA programme costed $22,000, compared to a full-time MBA which was $58,000.

These examples have demonstrated the effects of alternative methods in obtaining an MBA and the impact they have on the current offerings provided by institutions.

Coursera is another example of an online educational platform that offers a variety of open online courses (MOOC). The aim of their platform is to make learning accessible for anyone, anywhere, regardless of their educational background. They offer a range of free and charged learning programmes including; courses, specialisations, professional certifications and even degree qualifications.

There are a number of advantages in using Coursera. They use industry experts from top-tier organisations to teach the courses offered, thereby, providing students with relevant industry knowledge that universities may not necessarily offer. Additionally, Coursera offer online degree programmes that are affiliated and run by over 190+ world-class institutions. These universities provide the same content that an on-campus student would receive, meaning the qualifications obtained would also be the same.

This digital shift in the education sector has realigned students' perspective on traditional teaching methods. If students can attain an online degree from the same institutions for a more affordable price and an easily accessible service, then is it counterintuitive in choosing to attend university over the clearly competitive and cheaper alternatives?

Section 2

Attending University to attain a degree has no correlation with success.

A number of top-tier businesses have questioned the need for degree qualification requirements in their application process.

A new approach

In August 2015, Ernst & Young (EY), one of the big four professional services firms, announced the removal of degree classifications and UCAS points from their entry criteria. Based on the research conducted by EY, they "... found no evidence to conclude that previous success in higher education correlated with future success in subsequent professional qualifications," said EY's Managing Partner for Talent.

EY was the first company within the professional services industry to make this bold move, and by scrapping this policy, EY was able to open opportunities to talented individuals "regardless of background". Even though academic qualifications will be considered, they will no longer act as a barrier into applying to EY.

Instead of academic qualifications, EY believes the correct method of assessment is through assessing candidates based on their strengths. In fact, EY conducted research that demonstrated "... positive correlations between certain strengths and success in future professional qualifications".

A new approach

Following EY's unprecedented change to their recruiting process, Penguin Random House, one of UK's largest publishing companies also decided against listing degree qualifications as part of the application process.

Alternatively, they wanted to attract "a more varied candidate pool and future workforce". This transition took place in January 2016 with immediate effect, removing all degree filters from their job advertisements and job descriptions, giving all applicants the opportunity to demonstrate their skills irrespective of previous education.

Alongside EY and Penguin Random House, a number of companies in the United States no longer require employees to have college degrees.

In August 2018, the job review site Glassdoor compiled a list of 15 organisations that no longer require applicants to have college degrees. Amongst the list were well established companies like Apple, Google and IBM.

Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, strongly believes there is a "... mismatch between the skills that are coming out of colleges and ... the skills ... we believe we need in the future...". Cook emphasises the growing demand for skills such as coding and the idea that colleges are not providing a sufficient level of coding education.

The examples above, clearly show a reoccurring theme of a number of top-tier businesses not seeing the value in keeping degree qualification criteria in their hiring processes. Research conducted by the above organisations concluded that there is no correlation between the degree classification and future success.

The Glassdoor List

1. Google
2. Ernst and Young (EY)
3. Penguin Random house
4. Costco Wholesale
5. Whole Foods
6. Hilton
7. Publix
8. Apple
9. Starbucks
10. Nordstrom
11. Home Depot
12. IBM
13. Bank of America
14. Chipotle
15. Lowe's

Section 3

How can Universities make their degrees more relevant to today's working world?

Universities are in competition with a number of alternative learning methods that deliver level pegging opportunities to students. Platforms like apprenticeships and e-learning tools, are able to provide flexible, cost effective and interactive learning experiences compared to the traditional teaching methods at university. With these highly competitive alternatives available, students question the need to learn through traditional university methods.

Nowadays, students are typically digitally native, and universities need to recognise relevant tools that students of today are familiar with. This can be accomplished by enhancing student engagement and identifying how university degrees can add to their future success. In doing so, universities will be able to bridge the gap between themselves and their competition.

More industrial experience can help students enhance their readiness for employment

Universities have made good progress in encouraging students to undertake industrial placement years. However, the problem with the current placement year model, is that in some instances students will not have covered the relevant industry modules prior to the placement year. Secondly, soft industry skills learnt during the placement include; self-reliance, commercial awareness, business etiquette and networking. These may not be applied on return to university.

Therefore, institutions should recognise alternative methodologies for the placement year model, that equips students with a broader and more relevant learning experience.

Instead of a placement year, universities can collaborate with companies to offer students a staggered placement. This would involve much shorter placements that occur more frequently, over the duration of the degree. Therefore, enabling students to continually develop their practical skills whilst simultaneously studying.

This model will also enable students to periodically interact with industry experts and frequently ask questions and expand commercial knowledge and understanding.

Alternatively, universities can invite industry experts to provide the material and teach certain modules within the course content. The advantage to learning modules from an Industry Expert over an Academic, is the additional real-life scenarios and examples that experts can present, therefore, enabling students to learn through a different perspective.

Another approach may include collaborating with industry experts in local businesses to provide coursework content for specific modules. This would include current scenarios that students can relate to and learn from. Unfortunately, universities can sometimes provide outdated content and coursework that students cannot relate to. However, by collaborating with companies students can expect coursework that is more relevant to the current climate.

Augmented reality

Augmented Reality (AR) is a form of technology that allows the user to overlay digital information onto the real world by using a smart device. Through the use of AR, individuals can experience real-time virtual information of an augmented location overlaid through the device.

The students of today live in a predominantly digitalised society where they utilise technology to fulfil their needs including in education. By leveraging digital platforms like Augmented Reality, universities can provide a modern learning experience that students can relate to. Students consume knowledge in a number of ways and passively absorbing information by listening to a lecturer may not appeal to all students. However, by using AR, students will be able to learn in a more interactive manner.

Visualisation: Augmented Reality is a very animated concept, and through the use of this technology, students will be able to visualise complex scenarios in the form of 3-dimensional models to make it easier to grasp the content. Students can turn theoretical materials into visual aids to help them understand concepts better.

Also, Academics will be able to utilise the models created by Augmented Reality to help explain the concepts in more detail.

Engagement and Interactive: Incorporating Augmented Reality into lessons will enable student to interact first-hand with the technology, thus bringing an element of fun into lectures. Students are also more likely to stay engaged in lessons if they are able to contribute, therefore, motivating them to learn.

Accessibility: Augmented Reality can be accessed through smartphone applications that allow students to learn anytime and anywhere.

Cost Effective: Universities that adopt Augmented Reality can offer an entire virtual experience that enables students to access learning tools remotely. By creating this digital environment, students will be able to learn wherever and whenever it suits them. Additionally, universities will no longer require large lecture spaces to accommodate students, and instead, infrastructure budgets can be reallocated to other areas or even significantly reduced.

Section 4

The Social Experience of Attending University Should be Highlighted as a Unique Selling Point.

University is more than just a means to attaining a degree qualification, it's a whole experience that students look forward to. A big part of that experience is meeting new people and socialising with one another, as it creates a journey for students to experience. Therefore, this clearly creates a unique selling point for universities that alternative platforms lack.

The social experience of attending University should be highlighted as a Unique Selling Point

These intangible experiences are what make going to university unique, and institutions need to understand that there is a much broader reason to why students want to attend university. Institutions should leverage this opportunity by engaging with students early from the point of applying to university.

One way in which universities can engage with their students early is through the use of Augmented Reality. Universities can provide a virtual experience when giving prospective students tours of the campus and surrounding locations. Prospective students can view and listen to information about landmarks by overlaying an app on a device onto the landmark.

Additionally, what if students could view their accommodation room even before they move into it? Augmented Reality could enable students to virtually organise how they want the room to look without physically being inside it.

Monash University is a recent example where Augmented Reality was successfully applied in attracting prospective students. In 2018, Monash University held an open day attracting students to study a degree relating to the health sector. Students were able to project their smart devices onto a pamphlet and visualise graduates talk about their career. They were also able to provide prospective students with a visual of what a day in the job would look like. This was a smart move that Monash University took to attract students through early engagement but also to keep them focused by using platforms they were familiar with.

Section 5

Key Recommendations for Universities

Clearly universities are faced with rapidly growing competition that is able to offer relevant and current opportunities to students. There is also the prospect of new and emerging methods of teaching including; blended learning; online e-learning platforms; and social learning platforms; to be considered alongside traditional teaching methods.

However, for universities to have the chance of success, they need to understand the ways in which students learn, interact and engage with institutions. This may involve future proofing and enhancing qualifications to ensure they deliver outcomes that are required in the industries of tomorrow.

The key takeaways

1. Universities should consider the competitive alternatives available.

Students are open to a number of learning experiences, and universities need to identify the alternative methods that are being adopted to attract the current generation of students.

2. Universities should explore strength-based skills into degree programmes in order to prepare the students for employment.

Clearly top-tier corporations have disregarded the need to advertise degree qualification criteria in hiring processes, and therefore, universities need to teach and develop soft skills that employers look for.

3. Student engagement is vital for universities to maintain relevance in today's digital age.

Universities may enrich students' learning experience by:

a.) Integrating more industrial experience within the curriculum.

b.) Students learn in a number of ways and university teaching methods need to shift to learning by doing, in order to accommodate a wider demographic of learners.

c.) Leveraging technologies like Augmented Reality, that can provide modern learning experiences and encourage students to learn through methods they are familiar with.

4. Universities should engage with prospective students at a much earlier stage.

Attending university is more than just attaining a qualification, it's about the much broader experience that students look forward to. These intangible experiences are what attract students to attend university, and by interacting with them earlier they will become more aware of the respective opportunities of a specific provider.

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