



Changing or leaving your course

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1 Introduction

What's this guide about?

If you're reading this, you're probably feeling unsure about your current course – don't panic! Many students find that higher education is not for them. Help is available within your university or college to ensure that you make the right decisions from here. You may simply have made the wrong course choice, or have changed your mind, and switching to another course might be easier than you think.

Whatever your situation, this guide will provide you with practical, easy to follow advice to help you make the right choices at what's probably a pretty stressful and confusing time.

2 Unsure about your course?

What's wrong?

The term 'safety in numbers' often provides reassurance – so it may help to know that you're not alone in the way you're feeling. Other students have given some of the following reasons for wanting to change or leave their course:

- **Subject**
It's not what you thought it would be like; the work is too easy/difficult; you find it boring; you're just not interested in it any more.
- **Course**
The assessment style doesn't suit you; you don't like the lecturers or lecture styles; the way you're taught isn't to your liking; the course seems poorly organised.
- **Personal**
You're homesick or lonely; you feel out of your depth; you find it difficult to balance commitments, e.g. travelling to university or part-time work.

- **Financial**
You can't afford to pay the fees for your tuition or accommodation; you find it difficult to pay for textbooks or meet your general daily expenses; you have childcare expenses; you're worried about getting into debt.
- **Career**
You're having second thoughts about your chosen career path; you feel another subject may be more beneficial to your career prospects.
- **Institution**
The university or department is too big/small; you prefer to study in the city/country; your accommodation isn't what you expected.
- **Disability or health issues**
You may find you need adaptations to your study/living space; you feel unable to cope emotionally.
- **Maturity vs youth**
You feel unsuited to the course as all your classmates are older/younger; you find it difficult to balance studies with family/home commitments; you feel out of place on the course; you find the change between school and university hard to deal with.

There are many other reasons, but you may see here some similarities to the way you're feeling. Be honest and try to think what it is about your current situation that makes you want to change. This will help you to make the right decision and identify the best person to speak to for more advice.

One important thing to remember is not to feel alone or unsupported. Staff are available in your institution to help with all these issues. So get some guidance. Leaving the course without any sense of where you're going next often makes the situation worse.

Finally, act as soon as possible. If you're going to change course or leave, it's often easier to do so early in the first semester, when in-filling to other courses is more of a possibility. You'll learn more about this in this information guide.

CASE STUDY: GARY

Gary started university at 17, feeling sure about the law course he was studying because he wanted to join the police. He quickly felt that he'd made a mistake. He found the lectures weren't what he was interested in and he couldn't adjust to the change in culture between school and university.

He spoke to his careers adviser in his fourth week at university, who informed him that no specific degree subject was required for his chosen career. Having looked at other possibilities, Gary found a course in criminal justice. He spoke to the lecturer concerned and had transferred courses within a week!

He was also able to discuss things like the timetable of his new course, and find out exactly what would be expected of him. Gary knew his reasons for choosing a law course, but had not researched other possibilities.

He admits he was lucky, because he had considered just stopping attending lectures and hunting for a job. Taking early advice meant that he found a course he enjoyed and one that suited his future career ambitions.

3 Before making a decision

Consider your actions

Making a hasty decision may be something you live to regret, so think carefully before you change or leave your course. Try to identify the best person to speak to about your situation or difficulties, because it may be possible to resolve things. By speaking to an appropriate member of staff, you'll also be able to get 'the facts' and make fully informed decisions.

Develop a career plan

It's important to explore how your studies fit into your longer-term career. Rather than just deciding that you'd prefer to do a degree in history instead of sociology, or chemistry instead of biology, take this opportunity to see what career possibilities could follow from the subject in which you are interested.

Look more widely at the options that would suit you and check out in detail any careers you've identified. See the AGCAS Options Series and AGCAS Occupational Profiles in your careers service and on www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Options and www.prospects.ac.uk/links/Occupations for more details about where your degree can lead.

There may be other factors affecting your career planning which you'll also have to consider, such as dependants, geographical location, finance, disability or health issues. Student services staff or your academic guidance tutors may be able to help or direct you to appropriate services in such circumstances. Either way, help is available.

Once you have considered your career options you may find that:

- **Your current course is appropriate**
Many employers will recruit graduates from any discipline. They look for core skills such as research, communication and organisational skills, combined with the intellect required to study at degree level, as well as any personal or vocational experience you've gained. (See the sections on 'Hidden benefits of study' and 'Increase your employability' for more information.)
- **Studying for a degree is not appropriate**
You may find that taking time out to gain relevant experience might be more advantageous for you. This will depend on the type of career you wish to pursue, and where you are on your current course. For instance, if you're over half way through, it may look better to an employer and

benefit you more on a personal level to complete your studies.

Help is at hand

You can access careers guidance and information in person at your university careers service or via the web. It's perhaps better to try to speak to a careers adviser, since leaving or changing course will often have other implications, and you should get as much information as possible.

Student services also offer help and include many of the following departments: finance; counselling; careers; study skills or effective learning; disability advice, medical advice and chaplaincy.

Checklist: before making a decision

There are a number of things that you should do before making any final decisions. The following advice should help you sustain your studies whatever action you decide to take.

- Wherever possible, continue attending lectures, practical sessions and tutorials – and hand in all your assignments on time. If you decide to stay on the course, you want to be doing as well as possible. If you decide to change courses, you may need to ask your current course tutor for a reference, which will need to be as positive as possible. You may also be able to gain credit or a certificate for elements of your current course, but only if you actually continue to pass them!
- Seek advice as soon as possible but particularly before making any major decisions. Appropriate people are usually your course tutor, careers adviser, student finance adviser, counsellor or disability adviser. Some universities and colleges have other staff who specialise in helping students develop better learning, study and exam techniques. You should definitely consult your student services department to see what help is available.
- Family and friends may also be helpful as they often know and understand you

better and can help you get to the bottom of the reasons for your dissatisfaction. (For further details, see the section on 'Sources of advice and help'.)

- If you're a new student and think you've made the wrong course choice, seek advice as soon as possible. Speak to academic staff or your careers adviser, because they'll be able to advise you on course content and progression routes. Don't be afraid to speak up, and the earlier the better because you may be able to switch to another course.
- If money is your main issue, in most cases you can apply for a student loan. You should also ask at your current institution about access and hardship funds. Finance advisers and/or your student union should be able to help with this.
- Gather information about the financial (and other) implications of any move. (For further details, see the section on 'Implications of leaving your course'.) This is important because leaving a course can affect future funding entitlements.
- In general, if you're nearing the end of your degree (or even near the end of a current academic year) and feel able to continue, it's probably better to do so. Even if you no longer want to take your degree subject further or are likely to get a lower degree classification than you'd have liked, it will look better to have gained something from your studies than quit near the end.

Checklist: before leaving your course

- Talk to lecturers and careers advisers.
- Seek advice from your finance service.
- Look at other work or study options.
- Develop your career plan.
- Consider taking a break, and returning to study.

Checklist: before changing your course

- Check the new course meets your needs.
- Ensure it satisfies your career

requirements.

- Research which module options you'll take.
- Ask yourself, 'Can I stick out the course I'm doing?' – maybe it's just one smaller element in it that you dislike.
- Would a different university, but the same subject, be more suitable?
- Would a different mode of attendance suit you – perhaps studying part time, and getting a job?

CASE STUDY: JESSICA

'I enrolled at Bangor University to study for a degree in religion and theology but after two weeks I decided that I wanted to move back to my home town. I missed my friends and family and knew I didn't want to spend the next three years living away from them. I spoke to my personal tutor and he was fine about everything; he was very supportive and said he'd rather I studied at a different university and be happy, than stay at Bangor and be unhappy.

I researched the course in religion and theology at Manchester University and then contacted the course tutor. At first, it was difficult to slot in with the new course, as I was three and a half weeks behind. But the lecturers were really supportive; they gave me all the course notes I'd missed and allowed me to have an extension on some of the coursework.

If you're thinking of moving university or leaving your course, I'd recommend that you really think about why you're unhappy with your present situation and do some research on what options are open to you.'

This guide should help you with many of these issues. Above all, don't act hastily. You should not rush into making a decision; instead, research all the options open to you and consider each one carefully. Choosing and applying for your current course took some thought and effort and you'll need to apply the same thought and careful planning

when making any new decisions. Support is available, even if it's to help you move to another university or college, or make contact with staff or agencies who can provide help with other issues.

4 Making the most of your present course

Can you adapt the course?

If in general you enjoy the course, but you feel that some elements aren't right for you, see if you can make alterations to it before deciding to leave.

How can you change the course?

- If you're in the first year, the modules you dislike or find too difficult/too easy at the moment may not feature in later years. There may be a much wider variety of modules for you to choose from during the later stages of your degree – you should check this with your course tutor.
- If you're taking joint honours, it may be possible to swap major and minor subjects.
- If you're taking a modular degree course, you may be able to alter the subjects you study quite quickly.
- Most courses incorporate more options as they progress, so you may be able to tailor the course more closely to your interests.
- If you're struggling with study at degree level, you may find that there's help available with study skills – you should contact your personal tutor or effective learning service for advice.
- Find out if it's possible to tailor your dissertation, projects or essays to your planned career direction. This will help bridge the gap between your studies and your eventual career.

Can you make the final push?

If you're nearing the end of your course or year, remember that your career options are wider than your degree subject. Even if you no longer enjoy your subject, your degree may enable you to go into a wide range of other careers. Many employers and postgraduate courses are open to graduates of any discipline. You'll still need to do your best on the course, as many employers or course providers will be looking for a good class of degree and you may still need a reference from your course tutor.

If you're close to the end of an academic year, it's worth sticking it out, since you may get a certificate, or at least be able to enter at an advanced stage on another course later, at a time that suits you.

Enjoy student life

Employers look for more than a degree when recruiting – they also seek core skills that they consider important. To gain the necessary skills and increase your employability, participate in the range of activities and opportunities that higher education presents.

Hidden benefits of study

There are many reasons why people decide to study for a degree. For some it's an essential part of professional training. Others have no clear career in mind but are motivated by their interest in a particular subject. Make sure that you're clear what you aim to gain from your time in higher education, not only through your studies but also from other aspects of student life, such as:

- **Vocational skills**

If your degree course is vocational (e.g. pharmacy), you'll acquire knowledge that's specific to that profession, but the skills and background knowledge may be transferable to other professions (e.g. marketing or sales within a pharmaceutical company).

- **Academic knowledge**

If your degree course is academic (e.g. sociology or history), you'll acquire a detailed knowledge of your subject and the ability to undertake in-depth research, evaluate information/data and communicate your findings.

- **Extracurricular experience**

University is a great opportunity to get involved with sports teams and societies and to take an active part in the running of your course as a student representative.

- **Paid work experience**

You may need to work during term time for financial reasons and most students work during vacations. Your primary motive may be money, but you'll pick up valuable transferable skills, and experience that's relevant to a graduate career.

- **Voluntary work/work placements**

Your course may offer a work placement or your careers service or students' union may have links with local voluntary organisations or charities. Activities include anything from clearing woodland to working with children from deprived communities. This can provide a crucial advantage in applications for jobs or postgraduate courses, where a qualification plus relevant experience is often essential.

- **Student mentoring**

Some courses have a system of student mentors/instructors (to help students through university life) or 'buddies' (to welcome new students and guide them through the first year of their course). Taking on the responsibility of mentoring, will improve your skills in communication and relating to other people and be a useful addition to your CV.

Increase your employability

The skills you're likely to acquire from both the academic and social sides of your student life, and which employers seek in most graduate jobs, include:

- communicating effectively;
- working productively in a team;
- specific subject knowledge;

- getting on well with people in different situations;
- determination, enthusiasm, flexibility and drive;
- researching information and evaluating data;
- IT skills;
- working to deadlines and under pressure;
- planning and organising your time;
- initiative and creativity.

You should also think about any additional specialist skills that you're likely to have gained.

Check with your personal tutor or careers adviser about the Personal Development Planning (PDP) arrangements at your institution. This is often delivered via online systems and can help you identify many of the skills you've gained, as well as the areas you perhaps need to address. This will help you focus, and may help you decide whether to stay on your course or not.

Continuing by a different route

If you feel that your present course of study remains unsuitable, but you still enjoy the subject, you could consider a different way of obtaining a degree.

It might be possible to continue studying on your present course online, via a part-time route or by distance learning. This might resolve your problems if they're mainly financial, arise from difficulties in balancing study and domestic commitments, or are related to disability or health issues.

Credit for what you've studied

If you do decide to leave, it is important that you take the necessary steps to gain credit for what you've achieved so far, in case you decide to continue your degree at a later stage. You should also find out how long your current studies would remain valid if you decide you want to return to study.

Some courses, for instance in nursing, have clear guidelines about how long a break you can take and still return to study at the point where you left off.

Generally, completion of each year of a degree course would normally give you 120 university credit transfer points, depending on the relevance of the subject. So, if you completed and passed two years of a three-year degree, you would have 240 points by credit transfer.

Completion of a full academic year, may entitle you to a university certificate or diploma. Although this is not perhaps the qualification you set out to achieve, it may still be valued by employers if you choose to find work instead of further study.

5 Choosing an alternative course

Should I stay or should I go?

If you wish to change course, the first thing to ask is: 'Do I also want to change institution?' You may want to stay at the same institution, but study something else. You may however wish to go to another institution and study the same subject, or to study something else entirely. Whatever you decide, you'll need to consider the following main factors:

Subject

- Do you have a clear and accurate idea of what you want to study?
- Do you know what you might enjoy?
- Do you know what you're good at?
- Do you know what options exist?
- Are you certain you're transferring for the right reasons? (See the section: 'Unsure about your course'.)

If you wish to change your subject of study, it's essential that you spend time researching your options to get as detailed a picture as possible: be clear about what you did and did not like about your previous course; read prospectuses carefully; visit university websites; talk to tutors and careers staff; look at recommended textbooks for the subject. Gather as much detailed information about the course as possible before making an application.

Course detail

- Is the course modular – will you have flexibility within the course?
- What subject options are offered?
- How is it assessed?
- What modes of attendance are available, such as combined studies, part-time, specially tailored programmes of study, distance learning and online courses?
- Is there a work placement on the course?

Application process

The admissions tutor for any new course will need to be satisfied that you have the academic ability. If you wish to transfer to a course within the same institution, you may be able to complete an internal form. If you wish to apply to a different institution, whether for first year or advanced entry, you'll have to apply through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) at www.ucas.ac.uk.

The longer term

- What are the implications of your choice of course for any future career plans?
- Will it lead to any particular career area or is it a more general course?
- You also need to consider the financial implications of changing course. (See the section on 'Implications of leaving your course' or speak to your student finance adviser.)

While it would be inappropriate to insist that you must have a crystal clear idea about your future career, make sure that the implications of your choice make sense. Speak to a careers adviser for advice about the long-term career options with your chosen subject. (For further details, see the section: 'Before making a decision'.)

Changing institution

Consider what's important about the place where you study:

- Do you want to relocate or be able to stay at home?
- What kind of environment suits you:
 - city campus or rural;
 - large university or smaller institution?

- Will you need to consider accommodation or travel arrangements?
- Research the campus where the course is offered – sometimes universities have multiple campuses quite a distance apart.

You should feel happy and comfortable in the student environment so it's important to think about these issues carefully. Publications giving an alternative view to formal prospectuses can be very useful and may be available at the students' union. If possible, try to arrange a visit to any institution that you're interested in. Visit the local area and speak to course staff. Visit student accommodation and just try to 'get a feel' for the place.

Checklist: applying for another course

- Identify what course you want to do and where you'd like to do it.
- Make an informal approach to the course admissions tutor to check on the availability of places and discuss the possibility of acceptance.
- Be prepared to be persistent, as tutors can be difficult to track down. You may need to write, phone, make an appointment or email several times before you're successful in making contact.
- Allow plenty of time to go through the UCAS system if you're applying to a different institution. If you're applying after the closing date, contact the admissions tutor for the proposed course to see if your application will be considered before submitting your form.
- Notify your LEA or funding body of your changed plans and seek current advice on fee regulations. Notify the Student Loans Company, if appropriate.
- Speak to your student finance adviser.
- If you can transfer credit to another course for any work you've successfully completed, make sure you get a transcript of your academic credit before you leave.
- If you decide very early on in the course (during the first few weeks) that you want to leave, you might be able to transfer

straight to another course relatively easily, provided there are places left and the tutor is prepared to accept you. Avoid making a hasty decision to leave without taking advice and seriously thinking it over.

CASE STUDY: ANNE

'I started a degree in law with French. After the first couple of weeks, I began to realise I'd made a mistake in choosing to study law and started thinking about what I'd rather be doing.

I made the decision to try to transfer to the English literature department. I contacted the admissions tutor for that department who informed me that the course was full. I pleaded my case and was told to contact the department again at Christmas to see if any students had dropped out.

Fortunately, at Christmas, somebody did drop out. I was offered an interview with the head of department, who told me I could join the course, provided I read all the books covered on the syllabus so far and submitted four pieces of work on these texts.

My tips are: stay with your course for at least six weeks to really get a feel for whether or not it is right for you before you jump ship.

Make use of your personal tutor – inform him or her that you're not happy as soon as you can; and if you need references from your school or employer, be specific in what you ask for.'

What if the course is too difficult?

If you've failed the academic year, or a few modules, or even if you feel the work and study required is just too much, then it's a good idea to pause and consider your options:

- Are things as bad as you fear? Talk to your tutor as you may be able to sort out

extensions for coursework or be able to carry subjects over into the next year.

- Find out whether staff are available at your institution to help with study skills or exam preparation. Often, there are study skills advisers or effective learning advisers who specialise in this sort of help.

If you've failed, or know the course is too difficult:

- Consider looking at courses with lower entry requirements, perhaps at HND, DipHE or foundation degree level. These may provide you with a platform to build on, and gain confidence before returning to degree level study later.
- Be assured that university is not for everyone. Talk to your careers adviser about other options and sources of advice in the community. Don't leave without having some support and advice networks in place. Ask if your university careers service will still be available to you after you leave.

CASE STUDY: CLARE

Clare had always suffered very badly with exam nerves and was finding herself under increasing stress in the second year to complete course assignments and to prepare for the end of semester exams.

After discussing this matter with a careers adviser, she became aware of exam preparation workshops, run by the student study skills adviser within student support services, which she decided to attend. In addition, she was encouraged to go and see her course tutor to discuss her module choices for the next semester so that she could ensure that, wherever possible, she took modules that were assessed on coursework alone, thus reducing any potential additional stress from exams.

6 Taking a break from study

You may not want to change or leave your course, but just need some time out for any number of reasons. This is often possible, and may benefit your career prospects in the longer term.

Reasons for taking a break

- **Health/emotional**
If you've been ill or other personal circumstances are affecting your studies, it may be an option to take some time out to recover and regain your strength. Taking time off may be better than trying to struggle on with the course and finding that you're not able to give 100%. Make sure that you're using the support services available within the university and get additional support if you need it once you're back at home or out of the university environment. The student counselling service, student service and medical centre are there to advise, support and help make appropriate referrals for you.
- **Not the right course**
There are many different courses available. It's often very hard to decide which course is best for you. If you're not enjoying the course you've chosen to study, or it's not meeting your expectations, it may be that the course is not for you.
- **Finances**
Studying full time is a big financial commitment and with student loans and living expenses it all mounts up. It may be that financial problems are affecting your studies and time off may be necessary to put yourself in a more stable financial situation before study can be resumed.
- **In need of a change**
Going straight from school into further study can be a strain on many students. If you find it hard to get motivated, this in turn will start to affect your course work. Sometimes a change of scenery or a

change to try something different may be the answer. It's a chance for you to build up new skills and try new things but, most importantly, it will allow you to see what else is out there. Once you do decide to go back to study, you'll be refreshed and ready for the challenge.

- **Work experience**
Not all courses offer a chance to get paid work experience. Organising work experience for yourself will impress employers, but it will also allow you to enhance your qualification with some valuable experience. It may also open up careers/jobs that you didn't know existed.
- **Re-sitting part of the course**
If you haven't achieved a satisfactory level of results, it may be necessary to resubmit work or retake exams on a part-time, self-funded basis. Before leaving your course to take time out, make sure you discuss the situation with your course tutor to explain your reasons and clarify the length of time you plan to take away.

Using your time out effectively

Whatever the reason you decide to take some time out, it's best to have a plan of action. This will ensure that the time will be used in the most effective way possible. Below are a few ideas and tips to help you get started. (More details can be found in the 'Contacts and resources' section.)

- **Work placement**
A placement can help you build up skills, gain confidence and, if you play your cards right, it could lead to a full-time job. With the graduate job market becoming increasingly tough, having a relevant placement on your CV could help you stand out from the crowd.

Some courses have work placements integrated into the course but some don't. If you would like to arrange a placement but your course doesn't seem to provide the opportunity, you should first contact the course leader to see if it's possible. Your course leader may be able to suggest ways of setting up a placement and you

may be able to take a break from your course to make time for it.

- **Work experience**

Many students consider taking time off from study to gain some work experience in their chosen field. Work experience is an excellent way to help with your job prospects once you've finished the course.

There may be a possibility of negotiating time off for work experience directly with your department and they may also be able to provide relevant contacts. Gaining relevant work experience is important – it might help you to decide whether the profession is for you and may also be advantageous when applying for jobs.

If you're keen to gain relevant experience, your university careers service will be able to suggest appropriate organisations to contact and outline sources of vacancy information. Work experience options include voluntary work and project research work. You should also check www.prospects.ac.uk/Workexperience for further advice and work placement opportunities.

- **Time abroad**

Spending time abroad can expand your horizons, give you fresh ideas and help you to gain skills and experience that will enhance your CV. There is a wide variety of ways to spend time abroad, including organized gap year projects such as Raleigh International, www.raleigh.org.uk, and GAP Activity Projects, www.gap.org.uk. There is also work with charities such as Oxfam, www.oxfam.org.uk. Or you could travel and work through schemes like Work Australia which is organised by BUNAC, www.bunac.org. If you're intending to spend time abroad, your university careers service will often have access to a wealth of information to help get you started in this process. (Alternatively you can check out some of the websites in the 'Contacts and resources' section.)

Another possibility could be to study abroad. Studying at another institution could help to

motivate you again in your studies. Maybe a change is as good as a holiday? Many universities have links to the Socrates-Erasmus programme www.erasmus.ac.uk, which offers a chance to study in Europe, or the Fulbright Commission www.fulbright.co.uk or www.fulbright.ie, which arranges study in the US. If there's no specific departmental link, you should contact your university careers service for further information and approach your department to see if an exchange is possible.

CASE STUDY: STEPHANIE

Stephanie was originally intending to go to university but she decided to take a year out to consider her options.

'I originally had a place at university to study media but after a lot of thought I realised that I wasn't 100% sure if that was the course for me. I also didn't feel ready to go university and I'd become bored by full-time education. So I made the decision to take a gap year and gain some work experience. I felt happier with my decision especially as a large percentage of my friends were struggling with their courses and wished that they'd taken a year out. Having spoken to a careers advisor, I've now re-applied to university choosing a completely different course and I hope to go sometime in the future.'

Financial considerations

Financial rules in relation to taking a break from study are complex and can be confusing. You're strongly advised to check your own individual situation with the assistance of a student finance adviser at your institution or by contacting your LEA or funding body. (For details, see the section on 'Implications of leaving your course'.)

- **Reassessing your choice of course**

If you're not sure if the course is right for you, use your time out to seek some guidance about your options, alternative courses or career routes.

- **Repeating study**

If you're required to retake part of your course, it's crucial that you keep in contact with your personal or course tutor to receive necessary information, advice and support about coursework and exam dates.

7 Leaving your course

Making the right choice

Leaving a course part way through may leave you feeling disappointed, angry or lacking in confidence. You may feel like a failure or believe you've let other people down, or you could feel that you've wasted time and missed other opportunities. These feelings are understandable, but they're not necessarily correct. There's often no point continuing to study if you're really not enjoying it. It's important to make this a positive step and it often takes greater courage to admit that you've made a mistake and move on than to stay on a course where you're unhappy. You now have an opportunity to take a step back, look at other options and take time to get the decision right.

What can you take from this experience?

Although you're leaving the course, you'll be surprised by what you've gained from the whole experience.

- **Academic experience**

What have you learned or achieved from the course? Think of any modules that you passed or completed and any pieces of work that could be used as evidence when applying for other courses.

- **Personal skills**

What personal skills have you acquired from your studies? Have you learned any new skills such as IT skills, essay writing or research skills? Other personal skills might include managing your own finances and managing your time to study and work. All this information will be useful to

add to your CV or application forms. This exercise in assessing what you've gained is designed to give you a confidence boost and help you see where your best attributes lie.

- **Finally, find out what other options are out there**

Research the possibilities of both employment and study options. There are many different study options available which may suit your needs better.

CASE STUDY: RICHARD

Richard recently finished an HND at his local college - he didn't feel ready to go to university so he looked at other options.

'I didn't feel ready to continue to a degree programme as I wasn't sure if this route was right for me. I managed to keep my summer job on but I knew that I needed something more to do. All my friends seemed to be getting on and I was at a low.

'A friend mentioned trying voluntary work and I went along to my local volunteer centre to see what they had to offer. There was a lot to choose from and I decided to use this time to get some administration experience as my course had been very technical and I lacked basic skills. I ended up helping out in a local charity office and I also volunteered at the youth drop in centre. I'm really enjoying both jobs and I've picked up lots of new skills and my confidence has returned. I now have lots more to put on my CV and it's given me the chance to try something different.'

Looking for jobs

If you're leaving your course and intend to look for work, follow these practical steps:

- Speak to a careers adviser about using whatever qualifications and experience you've gained.
- Update your CV and make sure you have information on application forms and interview techniques. (See the 'Contacts

and resources' section.)

- Research employers who may offer support for study in the future, perhaps through allocation of study days or some financial support for part-time study;
- Consider alternative employment routes, including the possibilities of doing some voluntary work or participating in work placements or internships in your preferred field;
- Make sure you really know how to look for jobs. Although this sounds simple, you have to ensure you're aware of all the appropriate websites, recruitment newspapers (national and local) and professional journals. You may be able to find employment in your preferred career area, but at a lower level or grade than if you'd graduated. This still provides a way in and can often lead to progression.
- Be open and flexible to opportunities – you never know where things might lead!

8 Implications of leaving

Every year, students leave their courses for many different reasons. Leaving a course requires courage, organisation and planning – it's often anything but 'the easy option'.

Frequently asked questions

Q: What will employers think about me not completing my course?

A: Generally speaking, employers are interested in more than just your qualification, including some of the core skills you've gained through study. Employers are more likely to be impressed by a student who recognises that he or she has made a mistake about the course and taken proactive steps to rectify the situation and achieve stability.

Q: If I take time out, I'll be 24 when I graduate. Will this matter?

A: Being a few years older at graduation is unlikely to make much difference to an employer. Make sure you use any time out productively, perhaps on a gap year or gaining work experience.

Q: I'm 35 and worried that if I change course now, I'll be wasting valuable time. Is this the case?

A: If the course isn't going to get you where you want to go, then the time spent changing direction now may in fact be a good investment. It's equally important not to rush into a new course.

Q: I'm unsure about my course – can I speak to someone confidentially?

A: Yes. There are a variety of staff in the university who can help. You should definitely speak to student services and careers staff as well as your academic tutor.

Financial implications

As part of your research into the different options, you need to be sure of the financial implications of any decision you might make. The rules on whether you'll get further financial support towards your fees for another course in the future are very complicated and you're strongly advised to seek further guidance from a student finance adviser at your institution or through your local education authority (LEA), or check in A Guide to Financial Support for Higher Education Students 2008/2009, DIUS. Phone Student Finance Information on 0800 731 9133, ref. S/FSHE/V9 for a copy of this guide (also available on line at www.direct.gov.uk, under student finance).

If there are any changes to your course or place of study, the action you should take will depend on the change. These changes include:

- switching to a new course or place of study;
- repeating a year of your course or deferring your studies;
- leaving your course early;
- returning to a course after a break.

Switching to a new course or place of study

If you want to change your university, college or course, you may also, in some circumstances, be able to transfer the financial support you get. Your first step

should be to talk to your place of study and to your local authority to discuss the financial impact.

If your new place of study approves your transfer, it will send your local authority a form called a Notification of Student Transfer and they will carry out a reassessment on your behalf.

Repeating a year of your course or deferring your studies

If you want to repeat a year of your course, or defer your studies, you should first discuss your reasons with your place of study and with your local authority. They will then let you know how your financial support could be affected.

If you defer or repeat a year due to circumstances beyond your control, you may be offered full support. If your university or college approves your repeat period or deferment, they will inform your local authority, who will take a decision on whether you'll continue to get full financial support. If you're deferring entry to your course, your local authority will need to see a letter of confirmation from your place of study, dated appropriately.

Leaving your course early

If you leave your course early, it may affect your entitlement to financial support if you return to higher education in the future. You can find out more by talking to your local authority and place of study. Your student loan will enter repayment in the April following your last date of attendance, provided you are earning in excess of £15,000.

Returning to a new course after a break

If you're returning to higher education after a break in your studies, you should contact your local authority. You'll still be able to apply for a student loan, but you may not be entitled to financial support towards your tuition fees or a higher education grant if you've previously received financial assistance from the government. There are exceptions though and your personal

circumstances will be taken into account. Contact your local authority for further details.

Career development loan

Another source of funding is through a career development loan. A free CDL information booklet, containing all the details you'll need, as well as an application form, is available by calling free on Department of Works and Pensions 0800 585 505 between 9am and 9pm Monday to Friday. Or ask at your local Jobcentre, college or training centre.

Scottish funding

Eligible Scottish and EU students, studying at an institution in Scotland, are entitled to free tuition. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), www.saas.gov.uk, will pay the tuition fees straight to your institution.

The very general rule-of-thumb for Scottish students is that you'll be allowed four years' worth of funding, as long as your studies advance in an 'upward' direction. You will not be funded at the same level of study twice.

Repeat funding

SAAS may make an exception to this rule if a period of study is being repeated for medical or strong compassionate reasons (supporting evidence will be required).

False start

SAAS also appreciates that it can be difficult to know if you've made the right choice of course. On one occasion only, SAAS will allow what's known as a 'false start'. If you don't do more than one year of an HND, degree or equivalent level course (i.e. you don't progress into the second year), SAAS will ignore the support given to you for the first year and give full financial support for another HND, degree or equivalent level course. Do not automatically assume that you will be eligible for a 'false start'. Always check with a student finance adviser at your institution or contact SAAS. A false start is not available for an HNC or similar level course.

Gap year

Should you want to take a gap year, this

should be agreed with your institution to ensure a place will be secured for you upon your return. Also, if the decision to take time out is made after an application has been made to SAAS for funding, but then you decide you'll be taking a gap year, the institution must inform SAAS. Otherwise, SAAS will automatically send the tuition fees to the institution and that year's funding will be used.

It is always recommended that you speak with a student finance adviser or SAAS before making any decisions to take time out from your course, whatever the reason.

Checklist: when leaving your course

- Talk to a careers adviser or your course leader/guidance tutor about your choices before you leave. Seek advice before you officially withdraw from the course.
- Check the availability of places on the new course you wish to join. If you leave your course without first making arrangements to join another one, you might not be entitled to any more support towards your fees if you join another course later.
- Seek advice from your funding body to ensure tuition fees and living expenses will be available for future study. Also check if you have to repay any outstanding monies such as student loans.
- Check to see if you have any other monies owed. If you're in accommodation, you'll need to let the landlord or accommodation officer know in advance. If you have any doubts about money, please contact student services for initial advice.
- Confirm what credits for study, if any, you may be entitled to by contacting the faculty or department office.
- If applicable, formally notify the official body paying your fees or awards and the Student Loans Company. Talk to your bank about the change in your status.

Once you have all the information in place and you're sure you want to leave your course, you can officially withdraw and notify the university or college.

9 Sources of advice and help

Sources of help at your institution

If you're considering leaving your course, you should seek advice as soon as possible to check out the options and implications. If you don't want to voice your concerns to your course tutor, go first to your university careers service, student services or your counselling service for an impartial and confidential discussion.

Careers service at your institution

Make the most of the facilities at your own institution while you have the opportunity. Careers advisers can offer impartial advice to you about your options. They can also help you make a fully informed decision.

Careers library at your institution

The library will have resources to help you research different possibilities. There will be access to a wide range of information resources.

Even if you leave your course, you may still be able to use the facilities of your former institution. Some higher education careers services offer resources to students from other institutions which will allow you to access careers advice in your local area, although there may be a small charge.

Course/personal tutor

Make your tutor aware of any circumstances that are affecting you. They may be able to organise support that can allow you to stay on course – study skills, additional tutorials or alternative courses within the department or institution. If you feel that you can't talk to your tutor, please do find someone else to talk to – either another staff member or your university careers service or student services.

Student services

Student services or student advice centres at your institution offer a wide range of

support services, from study skills to advice on finance and accommodation. Many have a student counselling service and all will offer you confidential advice.

Student disability unit

Specialist advice and help is available through these centres. They may have links with external agencies that can help you set up employment or work experience.

Other sources of help

Friends and family

Not always an obvious choice, but they can sometimes be the best sources of information. They may have contacts in the industry that you're keen to work in, or be able to offer some work experience or different ideas about career pathways. Make the most of their resources, contacts and knowledge as they may surprise you and they probably know you best!

Careers companies

Connexions, www.connexions.gov.uk, is based in England and Wales and is a government-funded service offering all-age careers guidance and information. Careers Scotland, www.careers-scotland.org.uk, operates a similar service in Scotland, and Gradireland, www.gradireland.com, is a joint agency for all of Ireland.

Jobcentres

Jobcentres hold information on vacancies and government-funded schemes. These programmes offer work-based placements and/or training and can provide a step into permanent employment. You will need to check eligibility criteria. Jobcentres also provide job search services and arrange seminars, including help with applications and CVs. If you have a permanent or temporary disability, a disability employment adviser can offer specific help and guidance.

The internet

The web is a valuable tool in researching career pathways and advice. Websites, such as www.prospects.ac.uk and your institution's careers service site, offer a wide range of

course information and career profiles. You should be able to research jobs and advice, and access online guidance, depending on your circumstances. The web also provides a 'one stop shop' to look for vacancies.

Employer websites, recruitment agencies and specialist, dedicated job search sites, have made searching for vacancies a lot easier.

Further information

Local newspapers and professional journals are a good source of information. Local business directories can also provide some useful links. Local libraries normally have these available to the public and it saves you having to buy them all! To find local phone numbers and addresses for contacts in your local area, consult your local Yellow Pages, www.yell.com, under the headings 'careers advice' or 'employment agencies'.

10 Contacts and resources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS

AGCAS Special Interest Series:
Going for Interviews; Job Seeking Strategies;
Making Applications; Self-employment;
Working Abroad

AGCAS Occupational Profiles
AGCAS Sector Briefings

AGCAS Videos:
Looking Good on Paper; Why Am I Here?

Graduate Prospects

Prospects.ac.uk
Prospects Work Experience

Other publications

A Guide to Financial Support for Higher Education Students 2008/2009, DIUS. Phone Student Finance Information on 0800 731 9133, ref. S/FSHE/V9 for a copy of this guide (also available on line at www.direct.gov.uk, under student finance)

The Hobsons Directory, CRAC/Hobsons Publications, Annual

The Times Good University Guide, HarperCollins, Annual

Gap Year Guidebook, ed. Alison Withers, John Catt Educational, 2007

Websites

Finance

Career Development Loans
www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/AdultLearning/FinancialHelpForAdultLearners/CareerDevelopmentLoans/DG_10033237

Hot Courses: Student Money
www.studentmoney.org

Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)
www.saas.gov.uk

Student Loans Company (SLC)
www.slc.co.uk

Welsh Assembly (Education)
<http://new.wales.gov.uk>

Ideas for Taking Time Out

BUNAC
www.bunac.org

Camp America
www.campamerica.co.uk

Do-it
www.do-it.org.uk

Fulbright Commission
www.fulbright.co.uk and www.fulbright.ie

GAP Activity Projects
www.gap.org.uk

Monster Jobs
www.monster.co.uk

Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)
www.nicva.org

Oxfam
www.oxfam.org.uk

Raleigh International
www.raleigh.org.uk

UK Erasmus
www.erasmus.ac.uk

Volunteer Scotland
www.volunteerscotland.org.uk

Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)
www.vso.org.uk

Year Out Group
www.yearoutgroup.org

Yellow Pages
www.yell.com

Sources of Advice and Support

Careers Scotland
www.careers-scotland.org.uk

Careers Wales
www.careerswales.com

Connexions (England)
www.connexions.gov.uk

The Ethical Careers Guide
www.ngomedia.org.uk/artman/publish

GradIreland
www.gradireland.com

Jobcentre Plus
www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

Planitplus
www.planitplus.net

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
www.ucas.ac.uk

Addresses

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), Castle View House, East Lane, Runcorn WA7 2GJ. Tel: 020 7215 5555
www.dius.gov.uk

Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI), Adelaide House, 39-49 Adelaide Street, Belfast BT2 8FD Tel: 028 9025 7726
www.delni.gov.uk

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT
www.dwp.gov.uk

Educational Grants Advisory Service (EGAS), 501-505 Kingsland Road, Dalston, London E8 4AU Tel: 020 7254 6251
www.egas-online.org