

## **Degree Courses: Academic v. Vocational.**

One of the hardest (but most important) decisions facing a young person aiming for university is whether to apply for an 'academic' course, or a 'vocational' one. Those in the first group are not commonly linked with any specific type of work, while those in the second are directly linked to particular jobs or career sectors.

### **Pros and Cons**

Both categories offer attractions: an academic course could

- allow your son/daughter to pursue further a subject they already enjoy;
- give him/her more time to consider career options;
- supply a springboard geared to a range of postgraduate qualifications.

A vocational course, however, might appeal more because it could

- let him/her gain a work-related qualification at the earliest opportunity;
- illustrate the practical as well as the intellectual demands of a job;
- boost his/her appeal to certain employers.

However, unless your son/daughter is already committed to a certain career, taking a vocational degree carries some risk. This is because the course may

- be tailored largely (or solely) to a particular occupation;
- promote a relatively narrow range of skills/aptitudes;
- contain practical elements which prove difficult and/or disagreeable;
- have enrolled other students who are 'much of a kind'.

An 'academic' course, on the other hand, keeps career options open much longer, including nearly all those accessible through the vocational route. A one-year full-time or two-year part-time postgraduate 'top-up' usually suffices for a professional qualification in a large number of professions.

### **Winning combinations**

Of course, this still leaves a long first degree 'menu' from which to choose.

Selection, though, can soon seem more manageable than at first sight. To begin with, many people feel on safer ground with a degree whose content bears some relation to

their A-levels. Most, too, have a 'best' (or at least favourite) subject, even when their grades don't suggest this. In addition, those hesitant to narrow their focus are often agreeably surprised to find they needn't be restricted to one subject.

Such courses are usually known as 'Joint' or 'Combined' degrees, with time equally split between two (or occasionally three) disciplines. There are countless permutations, and, from a career perspective, often a good compromise is to twin an academic subject with a vocational one (such as French with Business Studies, or Maths with Engineering).

By putting their graduates in a stronger position with employers generally, these courses can also make oscillations in the job market easier to handle.

### **Work ethic**

Vocational degree programmes which include significant work experience are commonly known as 'Sandwich' courses. Placements typically last from one to three terms, occurring between periods of University-based study. This may lead to a job offer on graduation, or encourage a student to explore hitherto unconsidered specialisms.

Work experience is essential preparation for any vocational course, and can even prove helpful in showing someone they're not as suited to a job as they'd thought. However, your son/daughter should arrange this well before completing their university application, as reference to it will strengthen the personal statement on their form.

### **Travel in style**

If your son/daughter wants a degree programme which includes study abroad, there are, on the whole, probably more of these within the academic sector (including pure sciences) than the vocational one. Besides the excitement of a stay (ranging from a term up to a year) in a foreign country, this should help him/her 'stand out' to employers.

### **A note of caution**

Some forms of vocational training can be considered as a postgraduate option only by a very few students. Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science fall into this category. Even with a first degree, most of these still take four or five years, with the cost likely to be as prohibitive as the duration. The very large majority of entrants to these programmes are therefore undergraduates.

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