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EXPERT COMMENT: What to do if you fail your GCSEs

Liz Atkins, Associate Professor in Education at Northumbria University, discusses GCSE results day and what to do if you haven't received the results you'd hoped for.

GCSE time is here again, with the annual focus on the success stories: the young person who passed all their subjects despite tragedy or illness, as well as the young people who have gained ten or 11 A* grades.

I don't want to undermine those achievements – as they are often

remarkable. But there is very rarely any mention of the young people who do less well – those who fail to gain the benchmark five A to C grades, and who will not, or cannot, go on to do A-levels and progress to university.

This is the reality for a significant number of young people, with findings from [Schools Week](#) showing that more young people gained an E grade than an A* in 2016 – it was the same story in the previous two years as well.

It's often thought that the young people getting these low grades have [low aspirations](#) and this idea appears regularly in [government](#) documents. But my [research](#) shows otherwise. I have consistently found that [young people have high aspirations](#), but that apart from the academic high flyers – [few know what route to take to achieve their aspiration](#).

This is not helped by the fact that advice and guidance in terms of vocational qualifications tends to be confusing. This is partly because there are so many different options, and partly because some vocational programmes are of low value, and [lack recognition by employers](#).

So for those students unsure what to do next, here's what you need to know:

1. Know your options

Failing your GCSEs can feel like the end of the world – it isn't. You've still got loads of options. The key is to do some research, and find out what is available to you.

Most young people who find themselves in this situation will progress to vocational college courses or on to an apprenticeship. This is largely determined by final GCSE results. If you want to carry on in education, it might be worth making an appointment with your local college and seeing if there are any courses on offer that interest you. It's important though to make sure you understand exactly what you are signing up for, because there are so many options.

It's also worth knowing that not all [apprenticeships are made equal](#). In some cases an apprenticeship may mean on the job training with an employer – earning and learning – leading to a qualification and skilled work on completion. But it may also mean a college course with a work placement – so learning but not earning – which offers a qualification, but no guarantee

of employment.

It's not the end of the world. Shutterstock

2. Talk it through

If you can, find someone who already does the job you would like, and talk to them about it. What is it really like? What training did they do? What advice can they offer? Alternatively, speak to a family member or a teacher who knows you well.

Try and talk to as many different people as possible about their own experiences and how they ended up in the job they're doing now. Not only will it help you put things into perspective, but it might also help you to come up with some alternative ideas for your future, which you may not have considered in the first place.

Find support from someone you trust. Shutterstock

3. Make a plan

You need to be able to make a clear plan of what you want to do and how to get there – a kind of road map from GCSEs (whatever your grades) to your final career goal. Ideally this should be a year-by-year plan.

Do some research to find out what the training is for the job you want, how long it takes, where you can do it, and what qualifications you need. Some careers, for example, require a particular qualification, but also pass grades in English and maths at GCSE – so make sure you look into this thoroughly.

Find out if there are any vacancies locally in your area – even if they don't immediately seem related to your chosen field. Part-time work can give you valuable “employability skills” which you can build on as you work towards your chosen career.

Take control of your future. Shutterstock

4. Ask questions

Not all vocational programmes are the same, so it is really important you are prepared to ask colleges, employers, and training providers the right

questions when you go to enrol for an apprenticeship or vocational programme.

These might include: will this qualification help me achieve my goals? What other programmes might I need to do afterwards? How long will it all take me? What jobs are there locally for people with this qualification? How many of last year's students are now in skilled employment?

Finally, remember that you have lots of time, and don't rush into any big decisions. If you plan carefully and work towards your goal, it may well be that in a few years' time as you look around at young graduates with massive debts trying to enter a competitive workforce, you might be grateful that you were a 2017 GCSE "fail" who decided to take a vocational route.

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



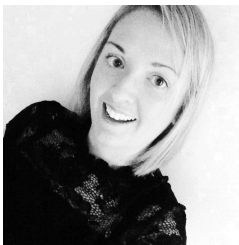
Ruth Lognonne

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk

07971274253



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk