PATHWAYS

Post 16 and post 18 choices by Sandeep – Medical Student

Which GCSEs do I choose? Which A levels? College or sixth form? Is further education even right for me? Do I want to go to university? If any of these questions have crossed your mind then you've come to the right place. Rest assured that these are common worries most students have. Deciding what you want to do in the future can be daunting and difficult! I am currently a 2nd year medical student and in this blog I'll be discussing my pathway into higher education and telling you about steps you, too, can take to help make decisions about your careers.

School and GCSEs:

In year 9 having had the opportunity to try different subjects like Design Technology, Cooking, Textiles, Computer science, French and Spanish, I was spoilt for choice. But what was I supposed to choose for my GCSE subjects, the ones I found **fun** or the ones I'd **need** in the future? I knew that I wanted a career in healthcare because I wanted to dedicate my time to helping others and I found the workings of the human body really interesting. At this point I didn't know exactly what job I'd want to do but being a pharmacist seemed pretty cool. So I went along to the schools career advisor, and tried to find out more about what GCSEs would be suitable if I wanted to study pharmacy. In summary he told me that science based GCSEs would be best. Not only this but he was also able to set me up with work experience at a local pharmacy (this turned out to play a big part in my career choices – so would definitely recommend work experience/ speaking to individuals already following the career path you're interested in)

So I finally decided that I'd do a mix of subjects I found both fun and ones that would set me up well for my journey into pharmacy. I decided that I would do Triple science (3 separate science GCSEs-Biology, Chemistry and Physics rather than the alternative called double science where you do fewer modules of each of the sciences). Bio and chem were subjects I already enjoyed, but physics not so much! But I stuck with it because I knew doing triple science would mean I could get a strong foundation in the subjects crucial for a career in healthcare. I really enjoyed French and having spoke to my teachers they all recommended studying a language because it's a skill that lots of employers want and look for! Maths, English language, English literature, Religious education were compulsory. So now that I had all of the above subjects in the bag I had one more space to fill on my options sheet. After a lot of hemming and hawing I finally decided on my final subject as History, which at first sounded boring but when I looked at the modules I saw there was a whole module about medical treatments throughout history, which intrigued me. (So taking a minute to see what topics will be covered in the course is really worth it because to your surprise you might find there's parts of the course that really do take your fancy! On the other hand you might realise that the subject that you really enjoyed during KS3 might be a lot different at GCSE level).

Work experience:

Of course a whole separate section on work experience! For me it was the biggest factor that helped me decide what I want to do and in this case what I DIDN'T want to do. (You might have noticed a reoccurring theme by now… that your pathway isn't just about thinking about what you want to do but a lot of the time it might involve thinking about what you don't want to do). Having done a week of work experience at the local pharmacy I got to shadow the pharmacist, seeing what exactly they do. After this one week I was left a little confused, I enjoyed the part of their job where they interacted with the patients, but I saw that this was only for a short period of time an that the

pharmacist didn't have a huge decision making role in the patients care. During year 11 we had a compulsory week of work experience, I organised work experience in a local health centre. Here I got to shadow Nurses, doctors and pharmacist – I enjoyed this and it confirmed that I still wanted a job in healthcare. After completing my GCSEs and getting the grades I wanted, I decided to call different pharmacies again to arrange another week in a different pharmacy, to hopefully get a clearer idea on what I wanted to do. This work experience made me realise that pharmacy wasn't my cup of tea. At this point I was a lot more interested in becoming a doctor, for this I would need to study medicine at university. However I wasn't sure I'd be able to meet the entry requirements of the course, as they required high grades.

Sixth form and A levels:

I chose to do A levels as it was a required by the university for the type of courses I was interested in. So I knew college or sixth form was my next step. I chose to go to a 6th form rather than college as I felt the 9-3pm timetable would give me a routine and structure, where I'd have designated study times when I didn't have lessons. To some this timetable seemed like less freedom than college, where your are free to enter and leave as you pleased; however for me I felt that I preferred to get most my work done by 3pm so that I had the freedom to do whatever else I wanted for the rest of the evening. It was also during A levels that I realised getting a balance between studying and other activities is important. Personally I enjoyed sports and liked to go swimming and cycling to get a break from studying. Deciding which A levels to do at sixth form was a lot simpler than deciding my GCSE subjects, since I looked at university prospectuses for courses in healthcare, these stated that chemistry was a requirement and that Biology was preferred as well. Finally, for my 3rd A level I chose maths as I felt this was a subject that I enjoyed and would come in handy no matter what course I did in the future.

Gap year:

From my work experience and volunteering in a hospital I knew that pharmacy was not for me. Having now completed my a levels, I wanted to take some time out of education to think about what I wanted to do. During my gap year I got more work experience at the hospital but this time I was shadowing doctors in a Renal ward – it was really fast paced and being there each day really excited me! I then started working as a healthcare assistant in the hospital, here I was able to get a realistic insight into what it is like to work within a team of healthcare professionals, and again I was able to see more about the doctors role. A combination of my work experiences, speaking to other students and using online resources (like watching online medical student bloggers) helped me to decide I wanted to apply to medical school. Now being in my 2nd year of medical school I really value having took a gap year, as it was nice break from studying as I got the chance to go to explore a few countries (which I probably won't be getting anytime soon!) and also equipped me with many soft skills like communication and team working, that are essential for the future.

Key take away messages :

- Use school **Career advisors** – they have lots of information and can help
- Ask for help from **Teachers** (they have lots of experience with HE and can advise you on where to find specific help)

- The **internet** can be your best friend as there's lots of Youtuber's sharing their experiences and other educational resources online
- Attend **UCAS/ careers fairs**
- Speak to **older students**
- Try to get **work experience** in the field you're interested in (no better person to speak to than the person already in the job you want)
- There's lots of help available, just need to reach out and ask for it
- Do take a gap year if you're unsure about your future choices – don't rush into making decisions! All gap years don't have to be about travelling; unless you want them to be ☺
- Important to have a work life balance – make time for the things you enjoy
- Speak to colleges/universities to find out what their course requirements are
- Your pathway to getting to where you want may not always be straightforward, so keep trying and don't get disheartened