

Transcript: Is That An Option: Getting ready for A Levels Results Day

Betsan Powys

Welcome to is that an option? The podcast from Careers Wales for anyone who's looking after, or looking out for young people waiting for exam results this summer, a summer like no other.

I'm Betsan Powys and I'm one of those parents with two children who are waiting for results and full of uncertainty about what life might be like for them once those all-important results emails have been opened soon, very soon

You've heard it said often enough I'm sure, but in 2020 Coronavirus, has taken away most of the certainties we all previously clung to. And so if you're wondering what university or college will look like this autumn or will taking a year off be a good idea. What are the pitfalls of taking a breather? What's the jobs market going to be like? If you're a school leaver, then keep listening.

We'll talk to experts from education, employment, apprenticeships and volunteering who in turn will listen to and advise young people and those who usually help them make big decisions. us the parents and guardians.

So stepping up first is Scott Gilmour. Scott lives in Mid Wales; he's waiting for his A-level results. And given the option, he'd head off to Durham University to study law. So I asked him whether COVID-19 had caused him to change his plans.

Scott Gilmour

Well, it hasn't really changed. I'm hoping to get into Durham University to go and study law. But it just depends, you know, all riding on August the 13th. And then we'll see how I do in the end, I'm not really afraid because if I don't do as well then I'll simply have to think whether I want to go back to do another year at school, or start an

apprenticeship or find a university next year or something like that. It's not the end of the world, whatever happens, obviously, if I got the results only this year that would just be the easier way. But I'm not, I'm not particularly afraid.

Betsan

Have you been thinking about whichever University you end up in? It's becoming clearer to anyone who's interested. There are indications University is going to feel pretty different in the coming year. How would you feel about all of that?

Scott

Well, there are there are the issues that you might not be getting the same amount of contact time as you would have done, but you're still paying full price, which feels kind of a bit of a ripoff.

But yeah, that but that's no one's fault, really. I don't think that anything really can be done about that. It's just down to the government. But then then there's also the social aspect and whether I expect things like we'll still be out, we'll be open then and go to things like clubs. But also because they're talking about doing a social bubble with your subject mates, so that's who you'd be living with so you wouldn't meet anyone outside of your home or be less likely to meet anyone outside of your subject which is something you'd enjoy doing, people with different mindsets, different types of people.

Betsan

So that's Scott and talking things through with him, not always agreeing on everything either. And as parents, we all know how that feels, is his mother, Catherine. Scott, she says is a sensible lad, not easily thrown off course. But I asked, given the real uncertainties around what higher education will look like this year, have they considered the option of deferring his studies,

Catherine

From what I've read, because I've been following quite closely that universities are certainly being encouraged to be more lenient and others I think there will be a lot more deferrals. We did discuss this with Scott whether he would want to defer and he thought quite carefully about it and said, well, it's going to be a unique experience.

No, he won't have the freshers week like other students had in previous years and clubs and societies won't necessarily run in the same way.

But it will be unique you know, they will be a COVID-19 year and it will be special. And so he I think he just thinks he's a bit of a Dunkirk experience somehow. So he'll join in and and see what see what what it brings for him and go for it.

Betsan

Do you think he's making the right decision?

Catherine

If it were me? I think I would. And Scott's quite young in the academic year, you perhaps wouldn't have guessed that from speaking to him but he's an end of May birthday. So you know to stay an extra year either at school or to do something else completely different might have been a good for him and he wouldn't have lost out really because he wouldn't have been that much older than the students he would join the following year.

But it really is we discussed it the pluses and minuses of deferring or not and he was confident that that's what he wanted.

So, in our house, there's a lot of discussion about lots of things. And you know, we always do that, look at whether you should or you shouldn't or what the other options are, things are never black and white, are they?

It's, there's a lot in this in particular, there's a lot of grey partly because when he was thinking about deferring, he'd been encouraged by a

question and answer session with the university itself that if you were thinking about deferring do it sooner rather than later.

At that point, we had less idea about how university life in this academic year was going to be now talking about bubbles of your subject and living with them, socializing with them and studying with them.

So this summer, this summer for the Gilmore family would have been a big summer anyway, because we, we knew they were going to be both doing external exams at the same time. So, it should have been quite stressful and significant. And it has been for such such a deep such different reasons. I think that they both dealt with it well in their own way. In lots of ways. It's a shame, particularly Imogen has worked extremely hard and was well prepared. It's almost like they've had the rug pulled from under their feet. The school were preparing them for learning at home. And I think that I expected that to happen that they would look they would all have to learn at home and then go in and sit their exams which could perhaps have been done in a socially distanced way, I didn't for a minute think that they would just stop the exams. I was quite shocked when that happened. I think it was the right decision because across Wales, it had and across the rest of the UK, it had to be a decision that was fair to everyone.

Betsan

So what are the questions that you have now, Katherine, and as you say, to thoughtful family, you discuss things you do talk about them. I mean, clearly, there are a lot of uncertainties, particularly as far as Scott is concerned as to how things will pan out for the rest of his academic career.

Catherine

Yes, well, if there isn't a second wave, then he will presumably go and live in Durham in halls, he's hopefully going to a fully catered college.

However, that might change because if they're accommodating everybody from the same course, in the same place, then he might not go where he was, thought he would be.

And I think I'm concerned that he, you know, he is far more likely than the rest of us to come into contact with other people with potentially with Corona virus and we never know how it might affect anyone. We all imagine that the youngsters will be okay.

But I am. I mean, I think any parent whose child is going away to university would always be somewhat trepidatious; happy for them that they're, you know, spreading their wings but slightly concerned. And this just adds a little bit of an extra burden that you just think well what might happen if they're real away from home?

Would they be able to get the right sort of help and attend a course Durham from where we live is an awful long way. You know, it's four hours away. So yes, I am worried but I think he's a sensible lad. And he'll, if he's ill, he will, he will hopefully seek help. And, you know, he'll be he'll be fine. So we have to let him go and enjoy himself which, although it will be different to other students experiences in previous years, it will still be University.

Betsan

Thanks to Catherine and Scott. And what we heard there, I suspect are the sorts of concerns most school leavers must be feeling about their options in this of all years. Interesting that Catherine herself would have been tempted to defer, but that Scott just wants to get on with it.

So Joining me to talk things through and offer as many pointers as they can. Richard Tobutt, who's a regional skills partnership manager in south east Wales. In other words, he's one of those who helps to

ensure that the sorts of skills our young people have are the sorts of skills businesses in Wales need. Welcome Richard and Aled Roberts from Careers Wales, so Aled tell us what sort of areas you can advise on

Aled Roberts

Well, my role working with Careers, Wales is that we give totally unbiased advice and guidance and support to young people. And also, really what we've been seeing a lot, actually during the past couple of weeks is parents.

So it's advice, information and then our role is to support really with making informed decisions, you know, that'll be based on, hopefully our solid guidance and information for people.

And in terms of what seems to be happening at the moment, more and more parents, obviously worried about what's happening in the current situation and looking towards the next couple of months, possibly years in terms of education for the children.

Betsan

Brilliant. Well, in that case, you are exactly the man we need for this podcast because that's exactly what we're aiming to do. So let's start by acknowledging that this is a summer like no other and that young people leaving school or having to do so with very few certainties to cling to, Richard

Richard Tobutt

Very much so. We're certainly faced with very challenging times, I think it's important to recognize that. I'm also the father of two young children. And I'm just glad I suppose that I'm not in a position where I'm having to, to make these pretty important decisions like the ones that both Katherine and Scott are about to embark on.

However, I think it's also important to stress that, you know, within these challenging times, that there are also opportunities that we also need to be mindful of, and I think now is a really, really good time to

embark on lifelong learning and to continue a learning journey really so parents don't despair.

Betsan

Let's start there. And then let's go step by step then because we're nearly there. We're nearly at results day I'm sure young people and certainly those who look after them are going to be getting a little bit nervous about what's ahead of them. So results day comes around. The results are going to arrive one way or another far more by email than in the past. Aled, on that day itself, you've got your results, they might be a little bit disappointing, not quite what you'd hoped for. They might be bang on who knows, but what would you advise, you know, families not to do as much as what to do on that day?

Aled

The first thing I think, as always, is not to rush to a decision. Most prospective students will know what their offers are for university. If they had the grades, fine, happy days, then they can move on.

But if they're not quite there, then they just need to take a deep breath, sit down and assess. And again, there's been a lot of work been going on over the past few months in schools, in your sixth forms.

We as a careers service, actually we've actually been surveying the year 13 in Wales, and had some very interesting results out of that. So, you know, when the day comes, hopefully the majority will be in a good position to make a good decision. But there is plenty of support out there. I mean, you know, they can contact universities, they can contact you pass. And also they can talk to us in Careers Wales, as I mentioned before wearing the unique position really, that we can give unbiased advice and guidance, you know, that's individual to that learner.

Betsan

And is it easy to know how to do that because there'll be an awful lot of young people and worried parents around so will further education,

higher education institutions, Careers Wales - will there be plenty of people ready on that day to be available to talk to families?

Aled

As always, there will always be people available to speak and I think this year more than ever, because of what's going on, you know, things might change, things are changing.

So you know, in terms of the universities, they will be available, you know, that their admissions departments, they'll be ready to go.

Usually they get an email or a text at about one o'clock in the morning on the results day saying that, you know they've been accepted or not.

If they haven't, then the process then is to maybe talk to the school first, contact the university, but certainly talk to us in Careers Wales as well, because some might have to make, you know, a decision, they might have to think about, right, I didn't get into my first choice, the backup choices then come into play.

Our advice and guidance will be key. Careers Wales, you know, as a company, we have advisors linked to every school and every college in Wales.

So wherever anybody is, you know, sat and done the exams, there will be somebody there available. And of course, as a career service we have our website careerswales.gov.wales which will have some information and up to date key things to look at.

We'll have a telephone line live chat. And of course, we'll be all across social media on the day.

So there's plenty of advice available on the day. But I think the most important thing, if there's anybody in any doubt, they should really talk to us in Careers Wales so that, you know, we can evaluate the decisions that need to be made, as I mentioned, totally unbiased, and then make sure that you know, all options are considered, maybe, you know, it's not a rushed decision.

It's something that they would Okay, talk to us, then talk it over with the parents, perhaps then go back to the university and see, you know, what's going on, but every case would be dealt with on an individual basis.

And we will have staff available on that day, as we have now and we've been dealing with a lot of students and a lot of parents and we actually did a survey I mentioned earlier.

That, you know, 61% of the ones who have sat A Level this year looking through university are worried about their grades. In other words, you know, 56% of them have had conditional unconditional offers from universities, and 51% of those aiming to take those up. So we were thinking, maybe there'll be a lot thinking about deferring, maybe you're not going, really, from what we've gathered in our work, there's only 1% of current Year 13s have decided that they're not going to go to university this year. So the vast majority are looking at it. As you know, yes, they're going to go and a very, very small percentage of talking about deferring.

So the advice really is to arm yourself with as much information as you can, if you need to make that big decision.

Betsan

So Richard, what about from your point of view because not everybody is going to want to go on to university, some might want to think about some form of further education but they're not sure what all the hearing or the news is that there are no jobs, jobs and going everywhere jobs have been cut everywhere. So you know, what skills should they be thinking in terms of acquiring, you know, how should they go about that apprenticeships? Are there going to be any available all of those questions? So, initially, when you get those results, what's the wise thing to do?

Richard

I think the important thing to do initially is not to panic, if you don't get your grades. There are opportunities that are out there.

A danger is certainly doing nothing. And I think it's important to take stock on where you are, where you want to be and how you're going to get there.

Personally, I'm a big advocate of work-based learning and apprenticeships, and there's an awful lot of opportunities out there in the field of work-based learning. Naturally, some industries have been affected by COVID-19. But there is reported growth in other industries, so, apprenticeships are a great route for some learners. And I think it's also important to stress that that not everyone successfully succeeds in in an academic environment. And therefore apprenticeships, work-based learning routes are better suited to some individuals.

Betsan

And how do you go about finding out where those are and what those are?

Richard

I'm pretty sure that you know there's advice provided directly by Careers Wales, but they're also a range of other organizations out there in Wales that do have a specific expertise in terms of work based learning and apprenticeships. For example, the National Training Federation for Wales are the umbrella body of work based learning providers and through interviews with the National Training Federation from Wales an individual could be guided on the learning and potential apprenticeship routes that are available to them. So yeah, that's certainly a good port of call.

Betsan

So for those who don't fancy, you know, going on to university, they've done their bit and actually, they will learn much better when they're working, you know, in a job environment and working, you know, learning on the job, what's your advice, or where they should find out more?

Aled

On our website, we actually have a section on the Careers Wales website, which deals exclusively with apprenticeships, and these are all kinds of apprenticeships and also perhaps looking at the year 13 cohort, that the higher apprenticeships, the apprenticeships, that you're going to need a levels to get into some of these apprenticeships, you know, with some engineering firms that are very, very competitive, they're actually harder to get than going into university.

And we have pages on Careers Wales you know, in all the sectors you can think of: business, engineering, finance, you know, in the health sector, hospitality media, obviously at the moment things a little bit unclear.

But there are apprenticeships on there today. And it's a matter of getting on and maybe now, having a little look.

I know the school that I work in, I've got two who applied successfully for apprenticeships in one in the finance sector and the other in the IT sector.

So those apprenticeships asked for very good A Levels, but the information, it's all there on our website, and I would recommend, you know, even possibly before you get your results to maybe just go and have a little peek to see okay, what is out there.

Some of the sectors, you know, we're looking at the moment obviously things like hospitality and finance and the retail sector. They're not looking too clever at the moment. But that's not to say that in a couple of months that yes they will be looking to recruit and recruiting top end of, you know, A Level grades, many, many of them.

Apprenticeships are not a soft option. I think many people from my era used to think of an apprenticeship as a soft option. But really no, it's a way for an individual for instance, you can now get a law degree by an apprenticeship, you join the company, they mold you into the way that they want you to work with them, and you're learning the business on

the job from the bottom up, but also you're getting paid. So certainly a good option. The caveat obviously at the moment is, you know, with so much uncertainty around a lot of employers, I think at this current time are holding off a little bit until I think maybe things settle down. But the opportunities are out there.

Betsan

Absolutely. And attitudes are changing aren't they towards apprenticeships and perhaps old snobbery about apprenticeships Richard, are long since gone now.

Richard

As I say I'm an advocate of work based learning and apprenticeships. I think there is research out there that suggests that on average, an apprentice does actually earn more than than a graduate. So apprenticeships are certainly a viable route for many. And in terms of pointing an individual to information, I think it's also important to stress that the Business Wales Skills Gateway is available that's available to learners to employers, parents, and within the Business Wales Skills Gateway there is an apprenticeship referral program where an individual can submit an expression of interest and they will then be contacted by an individual to discuss need in a bit more detail with view to brokering information and advice around apprenticeships and signpost an individual to a potential route a potential provider who can deliver a specific program

Aled

Can I just mention as well that there is the option here in Wales of the Jobs Growth Wales, which is the six month opportunity to get experience in, in the paid job. So, lots of these opportunities do lead to two full time roles.

So it's well worth looking up Jobs Growth Wales, you know, it's for 16 to 24 year olds, you know, there are some conditions to it. But again, you can have a look on the website to see if you're eligible, you live in

Wales. If you're not in full time employment, then you can have a look at Jobs Growth Wales as an option for maybe six months.

Betsan

Brilliant, lots of really clear pointers there. And really good advice there from Aled to start checking now, there's no need to wait until the very last moment until you've got a result. So that's one thing I've noted.

Aled, can we go back to a point you made earlier around deferring and the interesting research that you've already done around how few people actually it sounds are going to differ?

I thought it was very interesting that we heard Catherine saying that she'd consider deferring, but that Scott actually just wants to go for it. So can I ask you - when is it a good idea? And when is it a bad idea to defer? And if you're going to defer? How would you use that time?

Aled

Okay. If you're going to defer that, the key thing is that you must let the university know it's not something you can just decide and say, Now, I've applied right, I'm going to defer. This is something you need to talk through with the university because certain courses will allow you to defer, you know, things like medicine, you can't defer.

The one thing I would say about deferring is, if you are deferring, what are you going to do with the time if you are deferring for you, I would have thought most universities would want you to be doing something possibly related to the course that you're going to be doing.

And again, it could be as I said, there's only about 1% in our survey said that they're thinking of deferring, that's great. Possibly, because, you know, as we've seen in you know, in hospitality, retail, they're traditionally the sort of sectors that young people might take a gap year, go and work, get some money behind them before going into universities, perhaps, you know, with COVID, they've seen that these opportunities are now disappearing.

But the one thing with deferring and taking care of you need to think about it, you need to plan it. It shouldn't be something that, you know, comes up this late in, in the process, it should be something that that's really thought about, because many universities, I think now wouldn't want students to defer. And again, looking out there into the world of work, it's pretty tough out there. You've had a lot of people been furloughed. A lot of people lost their jobs. So again, the job market is very, very competitive. So you know, perhaps, from our survey, a lot of the year 13s have seen that, Okay, maybe three, four years in university could be the best place now to make sure that you get the skills, you've got the qualifications that will be needed in the jobs market, you know, in the future, and I'm talking here about all kinds of different skills, you know, things like, you know, we're going to be looking at more digital skills, more and more people are going to be working from home. So then again, learning how to do that time management, those types of skills are going to be they're going to be looked at a lot, lot more, I think in the future. So with deferral, I think it's something that really, really needs to be thought very hard about anyway, but in the current climate even more,

Betsan

You can see why you can't you're going to have sympathy with young people who had no plan to defer whatsoever. But the reason they're thinking about it now is that they're so uncertain about what their education is going to look like. Come September, October, I mean, some haven't heard anything from the courses that they're hoping to do, how much of it is going to Digital Learning, how is the social life going to be like that? You know, at higher education level, it doesn't sound as though it's, you know what I had all those years ago. So you can see why can't you that some are thinking about it late in the day

Aled

I would say that talking to the university, and finding out now how your course is going to be delivered in September, October will be

important. The landscape out there. We heard earlier on Catherine talking and Scott saying that Durham they're looking at putting students into a social bubble with their subject cohort. Well, that's going to be totally difficult. I would have thought that you know, you got to stay in that bubble, not going out. It's going to be very, very difficult,

Betsan

Richard, what are your thoughts on deferral? Because it's something that it feels like people are discussing and thinking about this year, precisely because of COVID-19 rather than anything else.

Richard

Yeah, I completely understand why individuals would be considering referring at this moment in time, it's a pretty challenging environment at the moment. And I can just understand from a learner's perspective and as a parent's perspective, you know, you want an experience at universities to be rounded and have high quality and naturally given given COVID-19, that there are challenges that are presented across the board really. I, my personal opinion will be it's very much down to the individual and the individual, and I'm certainly I'm certainly sure that Scott does, because he's mentioned it earlier. You know, he seems to recognize that the learning experience will be a lot different from from normality. The complete package of being a student will naturally change. And if Scott is comfortable with that, and happy with that, I think deferring is probably not not the best decision. For him, therefore, continuing on his plans is is is it certainly seems to be quite a sensible decision. And I think the important thing you know, if individuals are considering deferring use the time wisely, would be my view and doing nothing is not going to look good to prospective future employers. And therefore, continuing your learning journey is probably a really sensible decision at this moment in time, recognizing the employment market is is certainly challenged. So that for me now is a

really good time to continue with with learning, whether that be in a higher education institution or in a work based learning environment, doing nothing and sitting on a sofa is not a sensible use of time.

Betsan

I think I've got it got that very clearly. Can I ask one thing more from from both of you. Another question that will arise is about money. For one thing, there are young people who would plan to work over the summer so they had a bit of money behind them, going to higher education and so on. But also more seriously as you can have families who are finding things much tougher again, because of COVID-19, possibly furlough job losses, and are finding it much tougher financially than they would have done. So come results day and post results day. Again, any advice to parents and to guardians who have financial worries, no, but want the best obviously, for the children.

Aled

All I would say if you come and talk to us in Careers Wales. This is the sort of advice and guidance that we can give on an individual basis. I would recommend, you know, Student Finance Wales as a very, very good website which is updated constantly. But I think also going back maybe towards really now finding out What your university course will entail, you know how much of it is going to be face to face, how much of it, if at all will be face to face, because it could be that some of these courses, you might end up your son or daughter might be capable of doing it from the comfort of your own home. So that that may be something to think about.

But certainly, we as Careers Wales can give that impartial advice and guidance to individuals and, you know, to parents to help you, you know, make the right decision evaluate what's important to you.

Richard

Yeah, I just think it's important to stress that you know, naturally COVID-19 for certain sectors in certain industries has been particularly challenging in terms of job opportunities that there will be extreme challenges presented first for certain sectors like you know, engineering, construction, tourism hospitality, for example, but but there are other opportunities out there and there are some sectors that are experiencing growth.

Naturally those frontline roles within particularly within health and social care. There's also growth within the field of digital it software development, cybersecurity, and also sales and business development.

I just think they're going to be increasingly more and more in demand if you like and therefore there are opportunities out there for individuals to potentially secure some part time employment to help support them through their university life.

There are three regional skills partnerships that operate across Wales, and the regional skills partnerships provide advice to Welsh Government on the strategic direction of travel for skills within their regions.

I'm here representing the south east Wales region which covers the 10 local authority areas within south east Wales and we see ourselves as being the voice to government on behalf of employers. And we certainly exert influence around what provision is funded at further education and within the field of work-based learning.

So as part of our role, we certainly create and develop and obtain labour market intelligence and share that with Welsh Government with a view to them, then funding provision in in areas of need. =

Aled

That's a very good point because we use this labor market information as a key part of our advice and guidance, because obviously, when we see young people in schools, and we talk about, you know, where

the needs are, we've got members of our company who sit on the Regional Skills Partnerships.

So when we are made aware of where the shortages are, what the skill levels are, what people are looking for, what employers want, how the world is changing where the future demand is going to be we're up to speed and this informs us in giving the best advice and guidance to anybody who comes to talk to us at Careers Wales.

Betsan

Well, thank you both. I've certainly learned a lot already, 'don't do nothing' stayed with me. Consider your options. Be open to other options and get on with your research now so that by the time we get to results day and the next episode of this podcast, then you'll be ahead of the game.

Well, thank you to Richard and Aled. Lots of pointers there about what not to do as much as what to do. And it sounds to me as though they've set this week's homework as well, which is heading off to the Careers Wales website to dig a bit deeper for the answers to any questions we still have. That's at www.careerswales.gov.wales or call 0800 4844 or look out for Careers Wales on social media. So we will be back soon with the results episode of Is That An Option when the conversation will be less theoretical and just a bit more urgent