Brexit: the wake-up call for graduate career choice?

Theresa Thomson, careers consultant at University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol, considers the impact of Brexit on graduate career aspirations

It should come as no surprise that graduates are increasingly choosing careers with social impact, where they can 'make a difference'.[1] Employers large and small are luring in talented graduate jobseekers with promises of using their skills to solve social challenges and make the world a better place.

What has Brexit got to do with this?

The EU referendum revealed a deeply divided society, with 18-24 year olds voting overwhelmingly to remain.[2] What impact is Brexit having on the futures of students who started their university education within the EU and find themselves graduating in a country that is perceived as increasingly isolationist and in political turmoil?

Findings from a small qualitative research study, conducted one year after the referendum result, reveal a strong desire to create a more tolerant country and a determination to find a way through an uncertain jobs market. The study comprised in-depth interviews with 15 final-year domestic undergraduates at UWE Bristol, from a cross-section of courses. The quotes in this article are taken from their answers.

'There's a growing intolerance towards diversity and different people, and less compassion than perhaps there used to be.'

Values drive motivation

In their drive to have a meaningful career, Brexit has kindled a sense of social responsibility (*'It's definitely made me more motivated to try and create a better society'*) - and determination to do something meaningful (*'Maybe before I was just… I want some job. But now it's what can I do? What can I contribute? So it's probably made me a lot more passionate, but also more serious about it'*) - in graduates.

Fearing that Britain is regarded as increasingly isolationist, Brexit is a reminder that graduates can be role models for showing tolerance and openness. *'I want to be a teacher, this kind of teacher, because of Brexit,'* says one interviewee. *'I'd try and work where maybe there are signs of this kind of division. I'd seek out the problem. I'm not sure if I'd succeed, but I'd at least try.'*

Rethinking their career choice in light of social purpose, graduates are realising that they are part of a collective, who are seeking change. *'You see people working really hard to make this country better… which makes you think that you should do your bit to somehow help.'* There is an understanding that meaningful careers require commitment - one says, *'it's made me realise that you can't just go and do a job, 9-5, earn your money, go home, because that's not how society changes for the better.'*

Down, but not out

Yes, there's uncertainty about the future - *'nobody really knows what's going to happen'* - but this is balanced by some optimism - *'Jobs are out there, and they are jobs where an impact can be made.'* These graduates know they need a positive mind-set - *'It's about being adaptable and, to use an environmental word, resilient to the change,'* coupled with a belief that it will all somehow work out. As one says, *'It's all too easy to see the negative side of things, but there are positive outcomes somewhere.'*

Emotional wellbeing

However, some people cope better with uncertainty than others. Increasing numbers of students and young people are reporting mental health issues.[3] Today's graduates are transitioning into an uncertain world, where Brexit has had a vividly negative impact on the wellbeing of some:

'It's almost like in a kid's cartoon where they live in a happy colourful world and then it's suddenly all gone black and white and cold and scary.'

This impact is particularly prominent when thinking about job prospects:

'People are getting panicked. I think it's because of the uncertainty. People at university keep going on about it - because it's brought up in the news so often, it's always at the forefront of the discussion of things.'

Brexit stirs strong emotion. There are fears of being tarred with the same brush when it comes to how other countries regard Britain*: 'I don't want to be seen as that English person who has these beliefs and views,'* says one. There is anger with what feels like a return to *'mediaeval Britain'*, where we are *'culturally isolated.'*

But if these graduates want a better world, then maybe they are finding their political voice*. 'Brexit especially really impacted me wanting to get into politics more,'* beginning with who they vote for: *'we don't trust the people who are running our country'*, and the government *'feels like I'm watching some sort of mockumentary.'*

Amidst fears that rising inequality will not be a government priority in a tough post-Brexit economy,4 social mobility is already a postcode lottery.5 Will it be down to the next graduate generation to take up the challenge of helping to create a more tolerant and socially just society? Let's hope so because, in the words of one student, *'it's just a world I don't want to have to live in… because it seems to be going back, you know, five steps.'*

Notes

1. Andalo, D. (2018) Public sector jobs for graduates: find the best route into a meaningful career;Turner, C. (2017) Graduates are too 'socially conscious' to become bankers [Both accessed: 17 July 2018]

2. Moore, P. (2016) How Britain Voted https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted/ [Accessed: 17 July 2018]

3. Universities UK (2018) Minding Our Future [Accessed: 17 July 2018]

4. Helm, T. (2017) Crisis looms for social policy agenda as Brexit preoccupies Whitehall and Guardian Editorial (2017) Lost in Brexitland [Both accessed: 17 July 2018]

5. Social Mobility Commission (2017) State of the Nation 2017[Accessed: 17 July 2018]

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https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/brexit-the-wake-up-call-for-graduate-career-choice