



ALTERNATIVE CAREERS

Thinking about being a trapeze artist? A stonemason? A dancer? Self-employed?

...Or are you just not turned on by what you feel you're 'expected' to do after Oxford?

What do YOU mean by an alternative career?

There is no such thing as AN alternative career. If it were that simple, it probably wouldn't be alternative. Unlike the other Briefings in this series, all of which are written to help those interested to enter certain occupational sectors, and which necessarily follow a certain format, this sheet is designed simply to get you thinking.

Many students come to us (and attend the Alternative Careers Fair each year) looking for something a little bit 'different' or 'alternative'. In reality though, an alternative career is a personal matter, and what might be alternative for you might appear mainstream to someone else: would you see a career as a stonemason as an 'alternative' choice if you came from a family of builders? Alternative is as much a matter of perception and definition as anything else.

'Alternative' Work

When most of us imagine the world of work we think of the structured daily routine of nine to five (or eight till six, or however many hours might be needed to get the job done), a few weeks holiday a year, a reasonable salary and a well-defined training/promotion route. You *might* even think that because you will be an Oxford graduate, you 'ought' to follow a popular 'Oxford' career route and enter law, management consultancy, banking, accountancy or the civil service. At first glance, these might seem to be the only options open to you - especially if you look at the range of employers who appear to be investing a considerable amount of time, money and effort in attracting your applications. *Alternative* work covers unconventional working methods and styles, as well as unconventional jobs and employers themselves.

Taking more usual expectations into account, an **unconventional, or alternative, working style** might be working from home ('teleworking'),

working freelance, working on a voluntary basis or working part-time or as part of a job-sharing arrangement. You might even combine a number of these arrangements, and perhaps hold down a paid part-time job which allows you time to volunteer with a not-for-profit organisation, such as a shelter for the homeless or a conservation group.

In a way, unconventional jobs are more difficult to define. Do we simply mean something that is not expected of an Oxford graduate - or of any graduate? There is nothing 'alternative' about working as a gardener for the local parks department - but it would probably strike most people as an unconventional destination for an Oxford graduate. There's nothing particularly 'alternative' about working as a fundraiser for a not-for-profit organisation such as Oxfam, but it may seem an unconventional choice of career to contemporaries who have rather more material ambitions.

And what about **employers**? Is a public sector organisation unconventional? Is a religious organisation, or a pressure group? Around 200,000 organisations are currently registered with the Charities Commission, and more than half a million people are currently employed in the not-for-profit sector. In *your* eyes, does this still make it an alternative area in which to work? If a bank follows a policy of ethical investment and invests in environmentally and socially friendly companies, does that make it an alternative employer? Only you can decide how you define an alternative employer - but don't assume that your definition is the only one.

Your alternative career can comprise any of the elements above - but what makes it alternative will be up to you. Think about the following combinations:

- **Unconventional work style/Conventional employer**
 - part-time programmer with IBM
 - freelance editor with a Penguin books
 - home/teleworker for Gallup

- **Unconventional job/Conventional employer**
 - gardener for Oxford City Council
 - stress counsellor for MI5
 - chaplain for the Armed Forces
- **Conventional job/Unconventional employer**
 - membership secretary for the Pagan Federation
 - accountant for Amnesty International
 - administrator for a 'green' funeral company
- **Unconventional work style/job and Unconventional employer**
 - part-time dance therapist in a drugs rehabilitation centre
 - member of an organic co-operative or commune
 - clown in a travelling circus

Such options are 'alternative' in the opinion of the majority of people. Many involve not just an unconventional style of work, job or employer, but also an unconventional *way of life*.

Careers – in the holistic sense

If we extend our notion of a 'career' to what we do with our lives as a *whole*, the options multiply still further. You could pursue a 'conventional' job with an equally 'conventional' employer, but choose to live in a self-sustaining community, putting your income into a group 'pot'. You might live as part of a community linked only by the desire to live a greener or simpler lifestyle, or one which is experimenting with a social ideal, or which shares a religious commitment – 'alternative' or otherwise. You may wish to share your possessions and any income with people who may, at first, be virtual strangers to you. You can be as 'unconventional' as you like... If this appeals to you, you may like to look at <http://gen.ecovillage.org>, the website dedicated to community living, which has 1,500 pages on ecovillages and sustainability.

Less unconventionally, you might choose to donate 10% (or 50%) of your income to charities of your choice in order to support their work. You might decide to train as a counsellor or basic skills teacher and spend your leisure time volunteering at a local community centre or hostel. You might simply choose to live in as environmentally friendly manner as possible, recycling or composting your waste and making an effort not to get drawn in by the expectations and temptations that confront us on a daily basis in a consumer society. If you are interested in a 'simpler' way of living, you might like to read *Timeless Simplicity: Creative Living in a Consumer Society* by John Lane

(www.greenbooks.co.uk). You might even try to influence your employer towards a more environmentally or socially responsible way of working. Take a look at: www.peopleandplanet.org, which exists to educate and empower students and graduates to take effective action on the root causes of social and environmental injustice. The options are limitless – but the choice is yours.

Some people leave their aspirations for a more alternative lifestyle or career to a point later in life – perhaps when they've earned or saved enough to make it viable. There is a trend towards 'downshifting' – choosing a less pressured lifestyle after perhaps years of working at a stressful career. Alternatively, you may find that you can develop skills and knowledge in conventional employment sectors or roles, which will be snapped up by more alternative employers a little further on in your career.

So where do you start?

The simplest answer is: with yourself. If you do not understand what you want, you probably won't find it, or even recognise it, if you do. In the words of Joseph Campbell, "If you can see the path laid out in front of you, step by step – it's not your path".

When considering a choice of career most people will look at their strengths – their skills and aptitudes – and their interests and motivations, in order to identify the most appropriate options. If you are interested in an 'alternative' career, it might be useful to examine your motivations by asking yourself:

- What draws me to the notion of an alternative career?
- What do I mean by 'alternative'?
- What am I hoping to achieve through my work?
- What am I hoping to achieve in my life?
- What am I hoping to achieve by making an alternative choice...?

It is very important that you are completely honest with yourself. Some people are drawn to what they see as an alternative career by a desire to be *seen* to be doing something different...a few because, in their heart of hearts, they fear failure if they follow a conventional path.

Most are motivated by the desire to 'give something back', to 'make a difference', 'to do something worthwhile'. This is to be applauded – but it isn't the answer. Not in itself. If your motivations fall into this category, ask yourself:

- *What/whom* do I want to help?
- *How* do I want to be of help?

Your choice of 'alternative' career can be varied. You might, for example, want to help underprivileged children in the UK. You could do this by:

- training as a teacher with a view to teaching in an inner-city school
- joining the civil service with a specific interest in the DfES
- becoming an MP
- working for a charity raising funds to provide green spaces or after-school clubs
- donating a percentage of your income to a children's charity
- working for a pressure group campaigning for more equitable wealth distribution
- training as a social worker
- volunteering at a city farm providing opportunities for children to experience rural life
- volunteering to become a host family providing holidays for children from the inner cities
etc. etc. etc.

There are innumerable ways in which you could work towards achieving your aim. Each option would require a different level of commitment on your part and would have different implications for other aspects of your life. Some of the options outlined are 'conventional' – even professional – careers. Others would simply require you to give of your free time or money.

Your motivation is key. But so is what you can offer, *other* than your willingness and indeed commitment, to be of service in some way. You may be entirely unsuited to become a social worker, but could have all the persuasive skills necessary to be a brilliant charity fundraiser. You might not have the political commitment to become an MP, but you might relish the opportunity to work at the heart of government that working in the civil service would involve.

Alternatively, your motivation may primarily be just to do something a little bit different – a little bit out of the ordinary. You may decide that you really want to pursue a burning ambition to be a jazz musician, or to work in forestry management, or to live self-sufficiently raising angora rabbits on a remote Scottish island. If that's what you want, find out what's really involved, think about it *carefully* – and, if it's still what you want, take the necessary steps and go for it!

So, identify your goals, uncover your motivations, and then look at how you might best turn your ideas into actions. The Careers Service has a

wealth of resources to help you to 'know yourself' – but you might like to start by speaking with the Duty Adviser who will be delighted to discuss any ideas that you might have – however unformed they might seem. Remember, too, that there is a wide range of information on a hugely diverse range of career options (including such 'traditionally' alternative options such as the voluntary and charity sector, alternative therapies, and the arts). So, identify what you're looking for and research it, rather than waiting for inspiration to strike.

There are no specific strategies we can give here for finding an 'alternative' career – for all the reasons given above. The steps that you will have to take will depend entirely on the direction in which you wish to go, and might involve getting involved in voluntary activity whilst you are still at Oxford, or studying for a vocational postgraduate degree. However, you might like to start talking to people about what they have done, and to seek out, particularly, those who have followed a less conventional path. Look at the Oxford Careers Network (accessible via the Careers Service website) for Oxford graduates who have gone on to do something a little bit different – and make some contacts of your own.

Issues to consider

Alternative careers aren't necessarily easy careers. The very fact that they are alternative indicates that they are personal choices – and the path may not be laid down clearly for you. On the other hand, it may be that the hard work is in actually deciding what you want to do – and that the route into it is actually quite straightforward.

Consider the fact that by choosing something your family and peer group might also consider 'alternative', not everyone will understand your choice of career and the lifestyle by which it might, of necessity, be accompanied. Reconcile yourself also to the fact that you may (though not necessarily) earn far less than many of your contemporaries. However, if you have thought carefully enough about your choice, and made the effort to make it work, your rewards will be measured in terms more meaningful than financial.

Postgraduate Students

The broad advice given in this sheet applies to postgraduate students as well as to undergraduates. Many graduate employers are keen to employ students who have postgraduate qualifications, whether at Masters or DPhil level, and often see them as offering enhanced maturity

and a broad set of transferable skills. Whatever your particular circumstances, or career aspirations, the Careers Advisers here are well equipped to discuss resources relevant to your needs, and how best to find jobs and market yourself effectively.

International Students

There are frequent changes to the rules affecting international students and recent graduates wishing to work in the UK. On 30th June 2008 the UK Government introduced the Tier 1: Post-Study Work category of the Points-Based System to work in the UK. Under this scheme, international students can apply for leave to live and work in the UK for a maximum period of two years, provided they meet the eligibility criteria. It is recommended that, for the most up-to-date information, you check the UKCISA: UK Council for International Student Affairs website, www.ukcisa.org.uk/, which offers independent information and advice about immigration, finance and working in the UK, and also the UK Border Agency website, www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/workingintheuk/.

Please refer to our *Diversity* files in the Information Room for more information, or consult the University's International Student Advisory Service, www.admin.ox.ac.uk/io/.

Relevant Events

The *Alternative Careers Fair* is held at the Exam Schools in Hilary Term. In 2009 it will be held on 14th February. Stall holders tend to come from the not-for-profit, environmental and public sectors, and a range of talks/discussion groups give you the opportunity to listen to well-known speakers in these fields and to discuss a range of ethical issues.

The Careers Service holds a series of careers talks in Michaelmas and Hilary Term each year, and these include talks about heritage, media, and the not-for-profit and development sectors. For further details, please refer to the 'What's On' pages of our website: www.careers.ox.ac.uk.

Further Information at the Careers Service

Search the website Resources List for details of all our resources available at the Careers Service or online:

www.careers.ox.ac.uk/homepage/resources.

For Reference Only

Files

- Occupational file (green): Self-employment & Entrepreneurship Z
- Ethical Issues file: *Corporate, social and environmental responsibility*

Books

- *A Guide to Working for Yourself*
- *Going for Self-employment*
- *The Careers Guide for Creative and Unconventional People*
- *What should I Do With My Life?*

AGCAS sector briefings are available online at www.prospects.ac.uk. Look for "Self-employment – Why do it?" and "Flexible working – What is it?"

Oxford Careers Network

The Careers Service operates an online database of Oxford graduates who provide case studies and are willing to be contacted about their career. Use it to gain behind-the-scenes insights into an organisation or occupation, and to create valuable opportunities for networking. See our website www.careers.ox.ac.uk for more details.

Careers Advisers

Our Careers Advisers have knowledge and information on different areas of employment, but all Careers Advisers can help you with the different stages of your career search. Please telephone 01865 274646 to establish availability for discussion.

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