

Advising Young People About Their Future

*Dr Mariama Ifode
Offers Advice To
Those Advising
Young People About
Further Education*

In the year in which we celebrate the centenary of the birth of one of my favourite poets, Dylan Thomas, it seems only

fitting to recall some of his vivid emotion and uncompromising imagery to frame my thinking on advising and guidance counselling. In my view, Dylan's poem 'I dreamed my genesis' could be read as poetry that captures the difficulties inherent in the journey towards the fulfilment of one's full potential. How do we encourage young people in our charge, as primary carers or educators, towards their flourishing, and as Thomas so beautifully writes "to seek the sun?"

Before I begin, I must confess that I unashamedly love my job. My position encompasses talking to students daily about their choices, hopes and dreams. I have come to realise, however, that listening plays more of an important part in my role as Head of Careers. To listen to a young person is an immense privilege. As a careers professional, listening is an ethical obligation. Yet, how often do we listen to the young people around us, and especially when it has to do with their future plans, which you, their families, may be funding? When do the young person's dreams start and yours end? High school students face more pressures to succeed academically than ever before. The grade offers for most universities in the UK are the highest they have ever been, and the competition for the top schools in the US has not abated in recent years. Listening to a young person is not just about listening to them talk about their plans for their academic and professional lives. It is also about listening to their grades. What are their grades saying about their academic potential? Do their grades match their, or indeed your, aspirations? Conversations around university and college education have to place the young person at the centre of the process. Students cannot be co-opted into the process, as this will only leave them angry, disengaged and resentful in the long-run.

Secondly, once the conversations are underway, how can we support them to consider the right institutions for their flourishing? There are no easy answers, especially as the internationally renowned institutions are the ones, perhaps, with the most brand recognition. Add to that family affiliations (which may sometimes come with sprinklings of pressure and inflexibility), geographical and financial considerations, as well as the particular academic, emotional and psychological needs of the young person, then the temptation to adopt the "spray and pray" approach is, to some extent, understandable. This approach, which leads to applications to between 10-20 American schools may suggest that enough research has not been done to refine the number of institutions that would be good soil in which the young person could grow. It is all about

fit. When Admissions Committees in the US are considering applications they are asking "is this candidate the right fit for our institution and our campus"? Research with a comparative approach is fundamental. It saves time, it saves money, and it saves tears. For those who focus on applying to UK universities through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) they are limited to five institutions only (four for medical students), and there is only one application fee (£23.00). UCAS is a centralised system and it is responsible for sending the applications to all five (or four) institutions.

Thirdly, there is no point in planning your commencement outfit or graduation hat if your child does not even obtain a place at the university or school. That is the objective. To achieve that objective, it goes without saying that the application has to be solid in all areas. Some of this will be the responsibility of the young person (grades, application essays and personal statement), and some will be the responsibility of the teachers (letters of recommendation, school report, school profile, references). Both parties need to be aware of the crucial practicalities, namely deadlines and application fees. Further considerations are the fact that students have to be encouraged to start to think early about universities, preferably from Year 11 or 10th Grade. The young person could, for example, start to create a "candidate's portfolio" of achievements, work-experience, internships, awards, volunteering, jobs and any other activities that would make their application exceptional. This portfolio should authentically reflect their interests, gifts and talents. His or her voice and personality must shine through to enable those reading the application to say with resounding unity: "I want to meet this candidate and I want them to study at our institution".

Dylan's captivating oscillation between life, dying and being reborn, foreshadows the emotional journey ahead for all young people who plan to leave home for the first time. Our job is to ensure that the journey brings them new strength and a renewed vision of who it is they could really be when they are truly flourishing. ■



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