

Transcript – FE to HE progression

Host: Alana MacLeod

Guest Speaker: Justin Baker

Alana MacLeod: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. In this episode we'll be talking about the journey from college, FE level studies through to HE and on to employment. I'm Alana MacLeod, and I'm joined today by Justin Baker, UHI alumnus and trainee Chartered Accountant with Johnston Carmichael. Justin thank you very much for joining me today.

Justin Baker: 0:39

Thanks for having me.

Alana MacLeod: 0:40

Justin could you start off by telling us a bit about your time at Perth College UHI? I mean, what did you start off studying and why did you choose that subject in the first place?

Justin Baker: 0:50

Yeah, so I started maybe six years ago now, I started in NC Business. Initially I'd went to apply for the HNC Accounting, but the class was full. So, Kathryn Lyneborg who was doing my interview, she'd actually said that if you do the NC Business then you'll more than likely be guaranteed a place on it the following year. So that's what I did, I did the NC Business, and it was quite good so I've been out of school for probably about eight years at that point. So it was good to kind of get back into the swing of things, in a slightly easier class than what the HNC accounting would have been.

Alana MacLeod: 1:21

That seems like it was quite a good route in for you then.

Justin Baker: 1:24

Yeah, definitely it was good route in and allowed me to get to grips with sorting myself out with work and getting back into studying again.

Alana MacLeod: 1:30

That's great. So, after you completed that NC, you chose to continue studying and you went on to the HNC accounting, is that right?

Justin Baker: 2:21

Yeah, that's right, yeah. I didn't actually know if I wanted to do HNC Accounting or HNC Business, because I really enjoyed both modules. And Tina Riddell, who was the HNC Business lead lecturer at the time, she was quite keen to get me on to the business. But then, Sarah was also quite keen to get me on to the accounting, so I was kind of weighing up my options that point. The last modules that we did in NC business were the accounting ones. Yeah and I really enjoyed them so I kind of cemented my decision about what I was going to do after that.

Alana MacLeod: 2:04

Yeah, and you mentioned as well about Sarah was quite keen for you to go down the accounting route, I mean how were you supported through the decision making process, when you chose to go onto the NC business and when you chose then to progress to HNC accounting, you know in terms of family and friends, staff at the college, how, how did the decision making process go and how were you supported and by who?

Justin Baker: 2:24

Yeah, so obviously support from my girlfriend and family at the time was just, you need to do what's best for you sort of thing, they all kept telling me that I was wasted in retail. I always kind of had a keen interest in maths and numbers and that sort of thing, so it seemed like the best choice at the time. And yeah all the lecturers were really approachable, dead easy to talk to, door was always open if you had any queries. It wasn't an easy decision about that decide to go with accounting purely because that was the last modules that I did, and I thought, yeah I'm actually quite enjoying it.

Alana MacLeod: 2:51

You never looked back.

Justin Baker: 2:53

Never looked back, that's it.

Alana MacLeod: 4:22

What do you think are the benefits of progressing in the way that you did, so you know going from NC to HNC, you presumably went on to study the degree, is that correct?

Justin Baker: 3:06

Yeah, I did as far as you could at the uni with regards to the accounting, so obviously starting from NC level, like I say, it was good for me because I came out of school had moved away to Spain actually to spend some time with my dad because he was living over there. And then I came back, got a full time job, had a flat and stuff so it was kind of like didn't really have any other options but to keep working to pay for my flat. So, yeah, moving back into education I think coming in at NC, it just gave me an insight into more areas, I think and it allowed me to select one of the modules that I kind of enjoyed. I think that if I'd went initially into HNC accounting it might have been a bit too much and I might not have actually stuck out at it because it is quite a big jump obviously from NC to HNC. All the lecturers will that I'm sure you know that yourselves. We covered business and law and all that kind of stuff in NC business. So it just gave me a kind of flavour for everything and then left me to be able to make a decision that was right for me.

Alana MacLeod: 3:56

Yeah, a bit of a foundation knowledge and then yeah you can pick the route that best suits you. I mean, did you pick up on any other opportunities when you were studying sort of volunteering or extracurricular kind of stuff or were you working at the same time as you were studying?

Justin Baker: 4:10

In NC I was a full-time manager at the local Morrisons. So, I was working, five days a week and I was in college, three and a half days a week so you can figure how I managed to do that, it wasn't very easy.

Alana MacLeod: 4:20

Pretty busy!

Justin Baker: 4:21

Yeah, I was pretty busy so I was constantly changing shifts and moving stuff about so I could get to my lectures and that. But then after the first year I took a step down from the manager role, and that allowed me to focus more on my studies because I thought I'm not gonna be working full time again plus doing HNC, because it was just far too much. In HNC I managed to pick up a part time bookkeeping job as well, at an HR consultancy and that was really good because it kind of allowed me to, to put in to practice what I was learning at the time, and it was good to kind of how the skills would transfer over to an actual working role as opposed to a pen and paper in the college.

Alana MacLeod: 4:53

I guess as well that your position at Morrison's you know you would have had to deal with customers, those in your team as well so you would have had a lot of skills in dealing with clients and things anyway?

Justin Baker: 5:02

Yeah I think there is quite a lot of transferable skills that you can take obviously don't be disheartened if you are working in a retail role and think all these people are looking for experience, I've got absolutely nothing. But accounting and auditing is really client centred, so don't be put off, that's one thing I will say, I always thought like I've got no transferable skills whatsoever, but being able to speak to customers and contact people and not be scared to pick up the phone and speak to people, that's a big thing because a lot of graduates that come out, they've never worked, and they're the kind of things that they are not lacking so much but they just don't have the experience. I think yeah getting that life experience and kind of putting yourself out there.

Alana MacLeod: 5:38

Yeah, absolutely. So what are you doing now? You're at Johnston Carmichael, but where are you at in your stage with Johnson Carmichael and what's the end goal?

Justin Baker: 5:45

So, yeah, working at Johnston Carmichael and it's been over a year now. I took a year off from studying after six years at college. They were quite flexible because of the way the course has been set up by Sarah, she's kind of working quite closely with ACCA so means you get the maximum amount of exemptions that you can. So it's a big relief when you come to applying for them because you get all nine exemptions from that foundation level exam for your professional qualification, so...yeah I've only got four left to do, so I'm working towards my first one at the moment, just started the course on the first of June there. It's all kind of online study modules, it's probably not as easy as being in a classroom again to ask questions but there is a chat panel and stuff, and having the video conference background from the college as well is going to help with that, because I know what to expect. It's not like I've never done it before.

Alana MacLeod: 6:31

So once you go through your professional examinations, what will you be? That means you are a Chartered Accountant?

Justin Baker: 6:38

Yeah, I've initially got a 3 year training contract with Johnston Carmichael, and that's to get me through all my exams cos you need to log 3 years' worth of experience with ACCA as well to become full chartered, so that all kind of goes hand in hand. Once the three years is up, I'll be a fully qualified chartered accountant.

Alana MacLeod: 6:54

Excellent. So did you ever think when you enrolled on that NC business course that this is where you would end up?

Justin Baker: 7:00

Not at NC, no, because like I said, at the time I don't really know where it was going, but I think about halfway through HNC it kind of clicked that, this could become an actual career, not just a job. So yeah I think about half way through then I thought no, I'm just gonna go as far as I can with this and I think the way UHI sets it all out it is very much gearing you towards employment. So I didn't think initially that I would ever be kind of doing my professional exams, chartered accountancy

Alana MacLeod: 7:27

It's really good to hear the sort of step by step process helped you, you know, and you find it useful in getting back into education and moving up through different courses. If a student is listening to this right now, or someone out there who might be thinking about going back to college or university. What advice would you give them if they're thinking about doing the same kind of thing as you, moving from the NC level right through to achieving a full degree.

Justin Baker: 7:51

Firstly, stick in, that's the biggest thing I'll say. When things get tough don't beat yourself up about it. There was a few times obviously we had loads of deadlines and I was working and it is tough but then they always tell you it's gonna be tough they don't kinda sugarcoat it. And also, once you're getting to degree level, take full advantage of the work experience and stuff that you can. The work experience module that we did was really good. I applied to loads and loads of people in Perth accounting firms and non-accounting firms and didn't hear anything back at all. But don't be disheartened by that. Luckily I did manage to get a work experience role, through a company that my fiancé now works for. It was a local charity, and they had a finance department who kind of took me on for the six months that I needed which was really good actually because it gave me a totally different style of accounting, because charity accounting is completely different to corporate accounting. So yeah, it gave me a bit of knowledge and I think that was kind of one of the swinging blocks that got me the job at Johnston Carmichael, because the employee that came to the careers insight was the third sector manager for charity accounting, saw that I had the charity experience and it was her that actually called me out of the blue and told me about the graduate vacancy, so yeah, the biggest thing is, don't be disheartened and stick in, because, even after I was qualified from the UHI I had applied for probably over 20 grad jobs and I only got 3 interviews, so if you think about how many grad vacancies there are compared to how many graduates that there are in a year, it is tough, but you just need to keep going.

Alana MacLeod: 9:14

And I suppose putting yourself out there you know if you went up and approached Johnson Carmichael at the careers insights event as well to find out a bit more you know that sort of sets you apart too in that you're actively going to them to find out more.

Justin Baker: 9:26

Yeah that's the thing like there is quite a few accounting firms in Perth and everywhere else, so just kind of get in early if you can, summer placements and stuff. A lot of the places pre-Covid would have been looking for work experience people and stuff so the best thing you can do is just get your name out there early and get your foot in the door somewhere, as you've got that wee bit of experience it sets you apart from other graduates with no experience. I was obviously 23/24, when I went back to college. So it's not like it's ever too late, I'm sure there's plenty of other mature students who have thought I'm a bit passed starting something new. I just wanted to get across the point about the amount of jobs that I applied for and then I didn't hear back, because a lot of people when they don't hear back, it does knock their confidence a wee bit, so keep your head up and just keep going on – you'll get a break eventually.

Alana MacLeod: 10:09

It sounds like you've had a great experience. And everything that you've said there resonates with exactly what the student support team is looking for in terms of giving messages to students – you know put yourself out there. Don't be disheartened be resilient. Justin thank you again for your time and for exploring your journey through education and into a very exciting position with Johnston Carmichael, we wish you all the very best in your career. To our listeners thanks for tuning in. And just a quick reminder that after completing your qualification at UHI, you're a graduate for life. This means that you can access careers and employability advice and guidance at any point, students and graduates can get in touch via the Future Me system targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk or by emailing careers@uhi.ac.uk. So, visit the website for more information.