Having been to a GDST school since the age of five, when I started sixth form at Putney High School I expected it to be the same as all the other years I had spent at Putney High. I had an amazing time up to Year 11, but sixth form opened up even more opportunities, bringing with it a significantly more mature and independent style of learning.

The biggest difference that I experienced between Year 11 and sixth form was that lessons became more like university seminars, with each student contributing their own ideas and the lessons becoming more discussion-based. Along with this came a more friendly relationship with my teachers, in which I felt as if we were in a reciprocal learning relationship, rather than one in which they tell me things and I purely listen. Of course, the shift from studying ten to three subjects was also a significant difference, but I quickly grew to love the fact that I could learn about my three favourite subjects in a lot more depth, and dedicate much more time to each one than I was able to at GCSE.

With music as my primary focus of study in sixth form, I really made use of the wealth of extra-curricular activities that were on offer. More than 30 extra-curricular groups for music alone ran each week; I was part of two orchestras, two choirs, an a cappella group, and two chamber ensembles. Aside from music, I played in the tennis and netball teams and got involved with teaching younger students who were struggling with certain subjects.

Bethany Reeves is an alumnus of Putney High School. She was awarded an organ scholarship to read music at Brasenose College, Oxford, and is now in her second year of study.

At Putney, Bethany was captain of a number of sports teams and in the sixth form became Deputy Head Girl, House Music Captain and Senior Tennis Captain. She plays a similarly active role in the community at Oxford, playing in various musical ensembles and representing the Oxford University Tennis Club and college netball team.

Bethany plays eleven instruments, with grade 8 distinction in six of these, and holds an ATCL piano recital diploma. She is a keen composer and has had her work performed by the Royal Opera House Orchestra and at the BAFTA awards. Bethany also regularly performs at the Edinburgh Fringe.
In addition to taking part in these clubs, I was also Deputy Head Girl, House Music Captain and a Sports Prefect. A high level of commitment was required for these activities, so I was careful to organise my time, in order to get the most out of my A level studies whilst still broadening my experience through clubs and positions of responsibility.

I think the extra-curricular side of sixth form is hugely important to the whole sixth form experience as it helps you to develop skills beyond the academic realm, as well as being a really enjoyable way to relax and make friends from other year groups.

Alongside extra-curricular activities, sixth form also offered a number of super-curricular activities such as “Hot Topic” sessions; a programme of talks which took discussion of subject-related topics beyond the A level syllabus. These sessions were designed to prepare us for university interviews and, moreover, for university education. I found them so helpful and they contributed hugely to our desire to look deeper into our chosen university subject.

For me, I knew I wanted to study music at university. I was always willing to have a chat about possible university options, as well as the option of attending art colleges, going straight into employment or apprenticeships, or taking a gap year.

When it came to applying to universities, we were lucky enough to get plenty of guidance in terms of both the application and interview processes. The seminar-style lessons, numerous mock interviews and UCAS advice sessions all helped to support us through the application process, meaning when I got to the stage of staying in Oxford for a few days for my interviews, I felt really well prepared. Rather than dreading the interviews, I was looking forward to them! I enjoyed my whole sixth form experience so much, and am extremely grateful for where it has got me. I am so thankful to all the inspiring teachers who always made time for us to make sure we were having the best time possible - both in terms of our academic studies and our general welfare and happiness.

I made such great friends at Putney High, as well as developing really good relationships with my teachers, and it provided a smooth transition from Year 11 to university. I am really happy here at Oxford and am enjoying getting stuck into all the extra-curricular things the university has to offer, as well as spending time learning about the thing I love the most. I do really miss sixth form though and sometimes wish that I could just click my fingers and go back!

“I think the extra-curricular side of sixth form is hugely important to the whole sixth form experience as it helps you to develop skills beyond the academic realm, as well as being a really enjoyable way to relax and make friends from other year groups”

What would you like to do when you're older?” is a question with which I’ve always struggled. I expected the answer would dawn on me at some stage, and placed a lot of hope on the then-obligatory year 10 career profiling tests. An emphatic diagnosis of “fish farmer” was generated (the complex algorithm sadly overlooking my dislike of both fish and farms) and I realised that this was neither a question that could be easily answered, nor one that others could answer for me.

You may have already figured out exactly what you would like to do. You may have a strong sense of direction, or a real passion for a field. If that is you - fantastic! But if you are unsure of the shape of your future after sixth form, take heart, because not having a plan need not be daunting and, in fact, it opens up an exciting world of possibility.

As the end of sixth form approached, I felt as though I was in a conspicuous minority. An outlier, who for some reason, didn’t know what she’d like to do next. I thought I would go to university to buy myself some more time to come up with a plan. University came and went, and it was only at the point of entering the working world that I realised I was not alone. It turned out that most people did not have a grand plan. This was a revelation. I had always assumed that people got to jobs they enjoyed by following a clear and long-term plan they had created to get them there. But for many, as it turns out, a career path only appears as ruling things in.

I still don’t know what I would like to do when I am older, but I now know not to be phased by that. Whilst I don’t have a strict plan, I do have ambition, drive and a GDST education which, as I hope you find too, provides the self-belief and courage to explore my interests and trust my instincts. With this, an interesting and fulfilling experience that you have. Having to find your way and carve a career path that looks more like a responsive zig-zag than a pre-determined linear route is no bad thing. Allowing yourself to change direction as opportunities arise will lead to a richer and more fulfilled life.

For the many of us who aren’t sure of our plan, I would advise that you be guided by what you love; what you most enjoy and are most interested by. If this isn’t clear to you, take some time to introspect. Be open-minded, challenge yourself and experience things in a strategic way. Remember that ruling things out is just as valuable as ruling things in.

“…a career path only appears as such when viewed with hindsight”

Issie Rughani is a former Head Girl of Sheffield Girls’ School. She graduated from Durham University with a first-class degree in Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, and has since explored a variety of roles in the charity and education sectors. She is currently Education Initiatives Officer at the GDST; a position which focuses on enhancing the student experience and developing the added-value of the GDST network. Do get in touch with Issie at I.Rughani@wes.gdst.net

THE JOY OF NOT HAVING A PLAN

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