

Choose your tertiary course for long-term satisfaction

By BRIAN MARTIN

SOME of the reasons why students choose which university to attend and what subjects to study are misguided. The HSC must take a lot of the blame for the problem.

The people who "market" the University of Wollongong have provided some fascinating insights into the "image of the university" among high school students.

The University of Wollongong, like other universities, seeks to attract the best students possible. Apparently for lack of anything much better, this means that students with high HSC scores are sought.

Every faculty in the university pays close attention to its HSC cut-off, namely the lowest HSC score for entry into the faculty. At Wollongong, it is easiest to gain entry into education, science and arts. Commerce has the highest HSC cut-off. The new Law Faculty will undoubtedly have a higher cut-off still.

In addition, there are comparisons with other universities. Some universities in NSW have lower cut-offs, some have higher. Wollongong University is making gallant attempts to improve its standing in the HSC cut-off competition.

More sophisticated commentators look at the median HSC rather than the cut-off score.

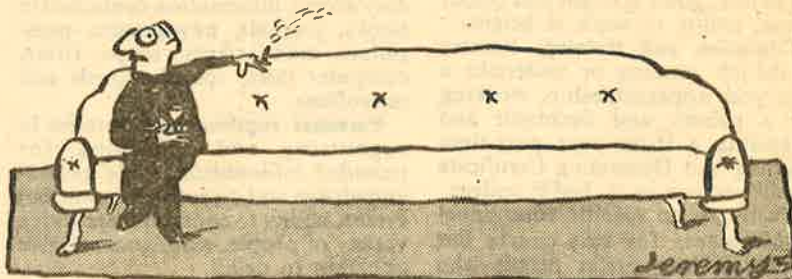
Yet underlying this system are some rather ridiculous assumptions, which are widespread among high school students as well as university students.

The main trouble is that students (or their parents) assume that it is better for them to get into a faculty with a high cut-off. That is the root of many problems.

Just because it is harder to get into a particular faculty or university doesn't necessarily mean that the teaching is any better, nor that the academics are more productive or up-to-date, nor that students will learn more.

To find out about good teaching, you can talk to current students and recent graduates. To find out about the quality of the academics, you can talk informally with others in the same discipline. But it seems that few

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students choose their course of study because of the quality of the education provided.

Some students attempt to do medicine, law or commerce because they want to make a lot of money — or because their parents want them to. These are bad reasons.

Personally, I would rather not patronise doctors or accountants who entered their professions simply because of the money. Other students attempt to enter difficult-to-enter faculties simply because they are difficult to enter. The key here is status. They wear a badge saying: "Look what I was able to get into."

This is also a bad reason for undertaking a course of study. Who wants to spend their life in an occupation just because it had status once upon a time?

The Arts Faculty at the University of Wollongong has a number of students whose one ambition is to get out of arts and into commerce. Naturally, this is bad for morale among students genuinely interested in arts subjects.

The thing that many students do not realise is that their best choice is to study the subject that really excites them. Ignore the HSC cut-off and the status race. If you really like teaching or physics or philosophy, then study that. Anyone who reads about the psychology of happiness will soon find that happiness has little connection with salary. On the other hand, job satisfaction is a key factor in personal happiness.

As for obtaining a job, it is not well enough known that any degree at any university is a virtual guarantee of obtaining a job — although not necessarily in the field of one's study.

History graduates have high rates of employment, but few become historians.

HSC scores are not a good predictor of success at university. Neither do sex, ethnic background or type of schooling have much effect on rates of success. Academics know that the best predictor of success is maturity.

The so-called mature-age students, who have some experience outside school, do remarkably well in their studies. As university lecturers, we don't care about HSC scores or past performance. We care about students who know what they want to learn and who put in the effort to learn it.

So unless you know for an absolute certainty what your goal is in life, it is a good idea to take a year or more off after school before entering university. Get a job, join a volunteer organisation, travel around the country, or just sit on the beach. When you've sorted out what you really want to do, then come to university.

Do you really want to be a doctor? Not just for the money? Ask yourself, would you want to be a doctor if the pay were low and the working conditions difficult? Would you work in Vietnam or Peru? They need doctors much more than Australia.

There is yet another delusion among high school students: that glamour occupations, such as medicine and law, are fun to do as well. The fact is that almost all jobs include lots of tedious and boring things. If you love the work, because you love social work or civil engineering, then this will carry you through the boring parts. Why do you think I put up with boring academic meetings, anyway?

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