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What About University For My Millennial Son Or Daughter?

| By Shelley Kinash |

There has been lots of media about university lately that makes parents wonder whether it is the right choice for their sons and daughters. This article starts by acknowledging the negatives and worries, but read on for a balanced perspective and advice.

Some of the recent arguments against university include:

- In the new digital economy, the workforce is changing, work is being replaced by computers; there is more crowd-sourced contract work and there are fewer traditional full-time careers.
- There are free alternatives to university such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which some futurists believe are going to replace campuses.
- It is challenging to choose a degree pathway because the types of jobs graduates can expect at the beginning of their degrees will likely have changed by the time they graduate. Furthermore, universities are often unclear about what degrees lead to what jobs.
- In the massification of higher education, there are far more graduates than there are relevant discipline-related job vacancies.
- Graduate outcomes (the percentage of graduates employed full-time after four months) are the lowest they have been in 20 years.
- Employers say that university is not giving graduates the skills, capabilities and attitudes they need to be hired and then to be successful employees.
- There is an increase in the opportunities and support for entrepreneurship and start-up ventures that do not necessarily take a degree.
- Pressure-related anxiety and stress are on the uprise and the first-year drop-out rates are high.
- Enrolment costs are rising; government funding is predicted to significantly decrease, thereby putting more of the costs onto families, and cost of living while attending university is expensive.

ATARS

Then there are conversations about the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). These are the scores that are calculated for graduating secondary students that may determine qualifications for different types of university degrees. For example, medicine, engineering and law have traditionally been known to require higher ATARs than degrees like business, arts and humanities. However, universities tend to be unclear about ATAR cut-offs for various degrees and the student admission scores vary from year-to-year. There is widespread agreement that there are a higher percentage of admitted students with lower ATARs than ever before. Universities have scaled-up their support for students entering with lower ATARs and other factors, which may increase the risk of failing or dropping out. There is, however, conflicting evidence and widespread debate as to whether or not ATARs are valid predictors of university success.

The students who graduated from Year 12 at the top of their classes are not always those who breeze through university. Even if they do continue on to achieve high distinctions (HDs) in university, employers report that the most academic students are not always the best employees because their intense studying may mean that they have missed out on well-rounded life experiences. At the other end of the spectrum, some students struggle with the generalist curriculum of secondary school and consequently achieve low ATARs. They may 'find' themselves in university and do very well when they are studying a particular discipline that they are passionate about. The implications are that parents should not classify their son or daughter according to ATARs. There are secondary students with high and low ATARs who are excellent candidates for university and experience success within university and beyond into their careers; while the converse is also true.

Why University?

The most straightforward arguments are economic. The United States Department of Education's (2015) research indicates that:

- University graduates with a Bachelor's degree typically earn 66 percent more than those with only a high school diploma, and are also far less likely to face unemployment.
- Over the course of a lifetime, the average worker with a Bachelor's degree will earn approximately $1 million more than a worker without a post-secondary education.
- By 2020, an estimated two-thirds of job openings will require post-secondary education or training. (http://www.edu.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-focusing-higher-education-student-success).

There is every reason to believe that these American statistics will hold up equally in Australia. While facts have not been as clearly presented, evidence from the Federal Government indicates an equivalent future.

There are many other benefits to university education. For example, university graduates have been known to have:

- higher quality of life, happiness and satisfaction
- expanded relationships and opportunities to meet people from diverse contexts
- love for learning and quest for knowledge
- more open doors, possibilities and opportunities
- self-esteem, status and respect from others
- defined and actioned values, ethics, morals and empathy
- critical-thinking, problem-solving and research skills as well as the ability to differentiate between fact or supported thinking, and opinion or beliefs
- heightened social and communication skills due to the on-campus experience of interacting with large groups of people on a daily basis.

Early Indicators that University is the Right Choice

So how do parents gauge whether or not their son or daughter should be applying for university or pursuing an alternative pathway? Before considering if, it is important to consider when. Not all Year 12 graduates are ready (or wanting) to go from high school straight into university. Some Year 12 graduates need more time or experiences to decide which disciplines or degrees to pursue. Others may need a break from studying before committing themselves to more. Economic circumstances may necessitate working to afford living away from home at a university of choice. Not immediately commencing university does not mean that students are forever cut off from higher education. There are numerous alternative pathways for mature-aged learners.

Here are some indicators that university may be the right choice now. The student:

- wants to go to university and is not only going because parents say so or because that is what his or her friends are doing
- has some ideas as to what he or she is interested in learning more about and/or pursuing as a career
- may not know what he or she wants to learn but still wants to learn something; in this case, attending a university that subscribes to the Melbourne model may be wise so that he or she can spend a year in a variety of units (tasting options) before committing to a specific degree pathway
- shows some commitment, dedication and resilience for study; those who complained their way through high school and avoided homework and revision where possible may not be

ready for the heightened level of commitment at university.

If university remains a consideration, then there are ways of navigating and managing one's student experience that will make the problems and worries listed at the beginning of this article less likely. In other words, encouraging university-bound students to follow this advice will decrease their chances of dropping out, failing, getting stressed or graduating unemployed.

1 Get skills (especially in technology and media)

Employers are vocal that many university graduates know theory but cannot apply it and lack skills. When they say skills, they mean both transferable and career-specific skills. Both kinds usually apply to the networked digital space. At university, seek out and practise opportunities to write clear emails without grammar and spelling mistakes. Learn how to write business reports as well as academic essays. Communicate in plain, user-friendly language and learn how to build appropriate engagement through social media. Beyond learning specific software, learn how to learn new software to stay up-to-date with constant evolution and change. Know what apps do what and how to keep abreast of the latest trends.

2 Differentiate and brand yourself (including online)

People talk about the massification of higher education. This means that there are many more university graduates than there are job vacancies in a field. Graduates are going to have to know and be able to confidently say why they are the best hiring choice. Stand out from the crowd. Students should research what skills employers are looking for by reading relevant job adverts through their degree, and make sure they have those skills by the

time they graduate. This can be done by carefully selecting subjects, by doing an internship and/or volunteer work, or by enrolling in extra-to-load workshops and outside-university training. Graduates also differentiate themselves by their extra-curricular activities, which leads to the next point.

3 Pursue extra-curricular activities throughout university

There are many options, including any concentration or combination of sport, music, drama, clubs, societies, student leadership and so on. There are numerous reasons why this is important. Employers are increasingly vocal that seeing extra-curricular activities on an application is a key and vital recruitment criterion. Many say they will not hire graduates unless there is evidence that these graduates are well-rounded. Participating in extra-curricular activities helps develop the three super-skills that employers are most looking for – communication, motivation/initiative and leadership. Extra-curricular activities should be fun, which reduces stress and increases relationships and thus social supports. Furthermore, these relationships extend one's networks, which in turn improves employment prospects.

4 Use the education technology that universities provide

Every university now has a learning management system (LMS) like Blackboard or Moodle where students access their assessment tasks, schedule, readings and interactive exercises. Most subject sites include extra readings, lecture recordings for revision, FAQs, glossaries and optional quizzes so that students can self-assess how they are going and where they need to devote more energy. There is clear evidence of a link between student engagement with the provided education technology and student success. Students who

delay or minimise use of the available education technology tools and resources are at much higher risk of failing, dropping out and/or not gaining employment upon graduation. It is vitally important that students fully use the provided education technology tools and resources early and often throughout their degree.

5 Take full advantage of student support

Universities have many varied supports for students that go well beyond assigned tutors and lecturers. Every university has a career centre, which all students should visit in their first year to maximise employability so that they are ready upon graduation. There are extra academic supports for all, (whether students are at risk of failing or wanting to move from a credit to a distinction). Libraries have much more than books, online and face-to-face. There are counselling services for the full continuum of issues. It is critically important that students explore and discover all that their university has to offer and take full advantage.

Today's exciting digital times are changing the workforce and people's overall lives in ways that they are only beginning to discover. Rather than making university obsolete, the digital revolution is heightening the need for carefully managed higher education experiences and educated citizens. Development of education technology also means that university students are supported like never before and they need to fully take advantage of these opportunities.

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