

1

Introduction and Text Usage

Read this chapter if you would like the following issues addressed:

- What is the purpose of this book and who is the target audience?
- How can students use this book to improve their study and learning at university?
- How is this book structured and what is the best way to read it?

Aristotle once said that it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. There are, alas, very few places in the world that can provide humans with the ability and the freedom to entertain thoughts and to question them – a university is one of those places. To study in a university is therefore a luxury; a lifetime privilege, and a profound growing experience. To use this experience to learn to question the world, and even the universities that provide this gift, is a responsibility which is bequeathed to all those who choose to study in the university system.

The transition from secondary school learning to university education therefore provides a collection of rare opportunities in personal development and freedom. In Australia, these opportunities are enhanced by a system of universities and learning that are well regarded in an international context. The challenge for those choosing to study in the Australian university system is how to best use what is offered, and how to help move the system forward for the next generation of students.

The purpose of this book is to provide an insight into the Australian university system, and how students can get the best out of it in terms of university/course selection; learning and professional career outcomes. Broadly, this book looks at:

- (i) How the university system is structured and designed to facilitate study and learning.
- (ii) The relative strengths and weaknesses of the system and how these impact upon students.

- (iii) How students can maximise their chances for positive learning and career outcomes while studying within the system.

This book is designed with a particular set of readers in mind, specifically:

- Students undertaking their final and penultimate years of secondary school study, and who are seeking to undertake a degree program within a university.
- Early year (undergraduate) university students who are already undertaking tertiary study in Australia.
- Parents and teachers (particularly secondary school careers advisors) who have an active interest in how study and careers are influenced by the Australian university system.

This book is not intended to provide a comparison guide to the various universities in Australia. There are already numerous publications that provide such rankings and comparisons. However, in this book, you will learn to understand the significance of the various university rankings; which of these are most important to you, and what level of credence to place upon them when selecting a university or course for study.

The question then arises as to why people should read this book, and how it will help students to improve their selection of university and course/study program – more importantly, how will it help students in their learning while they are at university?

To answer this question, one first needs to understand what it is that students feel they are leaving behind when they enter into a university undergraduate degree program. Many students feel that their final year of secondary study is pivotal to their future and career – a “*make or break*” period in their lives. To some extent this is true because this year tends to channel students into particular career paths – either trade, technical or professional. In reality, however, as far as degree students at university are concerned, the final year of secondary school is no more or less important than the first, second, third, fourth, fifth or sixth years of their university program. A success or failure in any one of these years can have the same dramatic consequences as a good or bad result in the final year of secondary school.

Another misconception that many students have in regard to their final year of secondary schooling is that it is the most difficult year of study that they will ever face. This is largely a myth, because most (if not all) university undergraduate programs are designed specifically to build upon subjects undertaken at secondary school, with each subsequent year of tertiary study designed to be more challenging and more demanding than the previous. To add to the difficulty, one also needs to remember that with each subsequent year of study, the natural filtering and attrition process ensures that competition amongst students is tougher, and the effects of results standardisation are lower.

Many students therefore find the transition from secondary school education to university study and learning quite challenging. To begin with, the environment is much bigger and more confusing; the classes are larger; the degree of independence is greater and, of

course, there are many more positive and negative lifestyle choices available when at university. This book will help to explain many of the issues that cause transition problems for students.

In general, most students who go through the Australian university system have a positive experience, and look back on their years of study with some fondness – for many, it is one of the most enjoyable periods of their lives. Perhaps more than in any other level or type of education, the university system enables students to make not only friends but colleagues who will, in many cases, remain with them for the rest of their lives.

Overall, Australia’s universities tend to provide a comfortable learning environment; a good student lifestyle, and a credible level of education which is recognised internationally. The university system and its environment are, nevertheless, significantly different to that which is experienced by students at secondary school level, and one needs to understand the differences in order to improve one’s chances of success in tertiary study.

If one had to summarise the fundamental difference between secondary school education and university level education, it would be in the expectations of learning and teaching. Universities are essentially designed to be places of learning, rather than places of teaching – this means that the undergraduate students are there to learn; the academic staff are there to learn, and the researchers are there to learn. Importantly, a key requirement for undergraduate students is to learn how to learn. In other words, to become independent of the teaching process. This involves a maturation of the thought process, and the resolve and independence required to move forward with the educational journey.

The concept of mutual learning within the university environment is not new. In fact it is a concept that was first proposed by Wilhelm Freiherr von Humboldt, who was the person responsible for designing the first university which combined both teaching and research, the University of Berlin (1810). Specifically, von Humboldt observed, in relation to the difference between schools and universities, that:

“It is a further characteristic of higher institutions of learning that they treat all knowledge as a not yet wholly solved problem and are therefore never done with investigation and research. This in contrast to the schools, which take as their subject only the completed and agreed upon results of knowledge and teach these. This difference totally changes the relationship between teacher and student from what it was when the student still attended school. In the higher institutions, the teacher no longer exists for the sake of the student; both exist for the sake of learning.”

Von Humboldt’s statement stands as true in the 21st Century as it was in the 19th Century, and it also highlights the need for secondary students to make a commitment to a different kind of learning process to that which they have practised over 13 years of primary and secondary education. Not only is the learning process different, but the relationship between the students and lecturers is also different because the university environment is one in which both are ultimately students. The motto which most profoundly encapsulates the von Humboldt ideal is an expression originally attributed to Michaelangelo – that is, *“Ancora Imparo”*, which is Latin for “I am still learning”. There is no more concise description of the purpose of universities and their educational ethos. Indeed, the

“Ancora Imparo” motto has been adopted by one of Australia’s universities (Monash) as part of its identity.

The educational ethos of universities, as simply encapsulated by *“Ancora Imparo”*, is one into which secondary school students must grow to fully appreciate. A common situation with newcomers to the university experience is that they have worked extremely hard to get good secondary school results that enable them to enter into a degree program. Needless to say, they feel a degree of euphoria, relief and burnout when they fulfil their expectations and get into a chosen course after all their hard work, stress, anxiety and anticipation. It is therefore quite unsettling to realise, within the first few days of study, that all the hard work that was required at secondary school level is not the end of the learning journey but, rather, just the beginning of a new road.

As previously noted, the subjects at university are more difficult; the classmate competitors tend to be operating at a higher level; the support structures are fewer; and the feeling of being a “senior” at secondary school is rapidly replaced with the reality of being a “junior” at university. The feeling of being the smartest kid in the class is replaced with the feeling of being just another student amongst a group of smart students.

The university environment itself is also extremely confusing – even to those who have studied and worked within it for many years. There are all sorts of odd and pretentious sounding titles; pomp and ceremony; many different layers of management and administration; strangely compartmentalised functions divided into faculties, departments, schools, divisions, centres, institutes, and so on. Little wonder then that people can go through their entire degree

program without ever understanding what really goes on behind the scenes.

Even more confusing for undergraduates within the university system is the concept of research. After all, what is research really all about? How do we know whether it is good or bad? How does having “good” research within a particular university help an undergraduate student with his/her learning? How do we even know whether a university is good or bad? More importantly, are there really such things as good or bad universities? In this book we will examine all these issues.

For the most part, students choose a university and an undergraduate course for a number of reasons, including:

- An interest in achieving a specific career outcome.
- A specific interest in a particular area of study.
- A general interest in learning for the sake of learning.
- An interest in university life and the feel and look of a campus.

Many of the decisions that students make in regard to choosing a course and university are, for better or worse, guided by extensive university marketing campaigns, which target secondary schools; secondary school students and their parents. These campaigns, self-evidently, are designed to present only the best aspects of a university or course. Some of the university marketing is up-front and obvious – some of it, however, is subliminal and difficult to detect, particularly when students and families perceive universities to be institutions with purely altruistic motives. For

these reasons, it is important to understand how universities conduct their marketing so that students can learn to separate the rhetoric from the reality, and make decisions on matters of importance to them – rather than on the “smoke and mirrors” generated by marketing campaigns.

Once students get into universities, one of the biggest issues that causes concern for many is the quality of the learning and the lecturing – some of it is excellent; some good; some mediocre, and some appalling. How then is a student supposed to know if he/she is performing well solely because of his/her own personal abilities, or because of the university learning regime? Perhaps a student is performing poorly because the learning and lecturing processes in a particular course are substandard. In other words, are students learning because of their university, or despite it? In this book, we will examine this issue, and what can be done to improve poor lecturing and educational practices at university.

In the past, few people ever challenged the quality of lecturing or the quality of subjects in universities. It was just assumed that senior academic staff were indisputably correct and their opinions incontrovertible. Students today have a greater responsibility to challenge quality at every level – not only because it more directly affects the way that they perform and their potential future career prospects, but also because a failure to challenge shortcomings ingrains poor practices for the next generation of students that come through the system.

Many university students also manage to get through the entire system without questioning whether or not they got value for money from their tertiary education. All universities in Australia are

funded through various sources, and these include government grants; student fees; donations; industry grants, and so on. At the end of the learning process, regardless of where the funds come from, students should be confident that they have gotten a fair deal from their university in terms of learning – if they leave feeling slighted, then there are mechanisms available to ensure that action is taken to protect the interests of future students. Again, a failure to challenge poor practices creates problems for the next generation of students that come through the system. So, in this book, we will look at the issue of value for money.

The majority of students do not undertake university study for the sake of undertaking university study. At the end of the university undergraduate learning process, therefore, students are faced with a number of options. The three most common options are:

- A career in business, community, industry, government or medicine.
- A research career within the industry, university, government or military sectors.
- Postgraduate/further study in career areas such as business or management.

In this book we will examine these three areas and see how undergraduate learning; the choice of courses, and the choice of university can affect these options.

In order to cover all these issues, and at the same time enable the reader to get quickly to the information that he/she requires, this book is written such that each chapter is largely independent of the

other chapters. Nevertheless, the chapters have been sequenced into a logical format that enables the reader to move through from one concept to the next logical concept in a natural progression. Hence, in order to use this text, you can either choose to read through the chapters that are most relevant to your requirements, or else read through the entire text from beginning to end.

If you are a secondary school student, or parent who is interested in what happens when your son or daughter enters university study, then you should probably read the entire book. This will give you an insight into the system, its benefits and its pitfalls, and perhaps provide you with the ability to remedy problems if and when they arise during your involvement with a university.

One thing that you may notice during the reading of this text is that there is no attempt here to simplistically present universities as altruistic and flawless pillars of knowledge. In this book, the negative attributes will be highlighted as strongly as the positive attributes. It is only by having this broad understanding of the positive and negative attributes of a university that one can make the best out of the learning process.

Another issue that you need to understand in the context of university study, and the recognition that the system is not perfect, is that there are ways of improving it. Although Australian universities are relatively recent phenomena in the global university context, even some of these are more than a century old. As a result of their longevity, universities need a constant spur to encourage them to change and adapt to modern practices and expectations. This is where undergraduate students need to actively make their

mark and leave their mark. When people study and learn within a university, they also have a responsibility to consider those that will follow on after them, and how their experience can be improved. Without this student driven impetus for change, universities inevitably stagnate and fall below societal expectations.

In looking at all these issues, and how they affect students, parents, and secondary school careers advisors, Table 1.1 shows the chapter contents of this book and the objectives of each chapter. This will enable people to determine the relevance of each chapter to their requirements. Essentially, if you are in the final year of secondary study or in the early years of university study then all chapters will be relevant to you.

At the beginning of each chapter is a summary of the key issues that are addressed within the chapter. At the end of each chapter is a summary of key points that have been covered therein. These serve as a quick reference guide to the important issues, as they specifically relate to study and learning and students within the system.

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Issues</i>
2	The Australian University System	The current system; its history and funding
3	University Governance and Students	How does university governance affect undergraduate students?
4	Understanding University Marketing	How do I separate fact from marketing fiction? What are the major marketing tools and illusions that universities employ?
5	Selecting a University	How should I select a university? What factors should I consider, and will the selection of a university be critical to career success?
6	Life as an Undergraduate	What can I expect from the university as an undergraduate? What are the misconceptions?
7	Undergraduate Learning	What is expected from undergraduates at university? How can I develop independent study patterns and a mature approach to study?
8	When Learning Goes Wrong	What do I do when I run into difficulties because of the university, or because of changes in the way I view the world and my future in it?
9	Value for Money	Am I getting what I am paying for?
10	University Research	What is university research and how does it impact on undergraduate study?
11	The Professional Career After University	What do I do if I am seeking a professional career after university?
12	Postgraduate Study Options	What do I do if I wish to undertake postgraduate courses after graduation?
13	Summing Up	Putting the pieces together into a bigger picture.

Table 1.1 – Overview of Chapters and Contents

