

# 4

## Understanding University Marketing

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

- What basic marketing techniques do universities employ to win over students, their parents and careers advisors?
- How can students learn to separate the marketing rhetoric from reality?

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century American educator, Horace Mann, once observed that:

*“Character is what God and the angels know of us; reputation is what men and women think of us...”*

Universities, like many organisations that are operated by humans, tend to be built upon reputations. In universities, it is the reputation of both the organisation and the individuals within that are perceived to be paramount when it comes to selling the ideal of tertiary education to students and their parents, and even to the secondary school career advisors that influence them.

Understanding university marketing is an important step towards discerning character from reputation, in the context of selecting a university and, more importantly, in understanding how reputation influences the characteristics of those within the university. University marketing is therefore, in a nutshell, all about influencing what *“men and women think”*.

Australian students are fortunate in having a reasonable standard of universities, across the board, and generally these organisations employ marketing approaches which are both ethical and fair. So, while the choice of university and course is often difficult, students can have some reassurance in the fact that Australian universities have a fundamental level of integrity in their promotional methods.

As with most other forms of marketing, however, universities endeavour to sell the *“sizzle”* rather than the *“sausage”* – in other words, to create a tantalising message that resonates with the inner

ambitions and values of individuals, in order to lead them towards an emotive decision, rather than to simply present data that enables those individuals to decide clinically upon a course of action based upon facts.

Those who have studied the vast array of promotional literature, produced by various universities around the world, rapidly discover that there are many words and phrases that appear over and over, regardless of the university. These include:

- Internationally renowned (“...a world leader...”).
- Award winning.
- Prestigious.
- Excellence.
- Proud history.
- Superb facilities.
- Leadership.
- Collegiate atmosphere.
- Career oriented.
- Tradition.
- Exciting new learning models.
- Flexible learning.

In order to understand why such phrases are used, one needs to understand the perceived magnitude of the decision associated with the choice of a university. Many people, quite reasonably, assume that the choice of a university can have lifelong implications

for their careers and standing in the community. In the case of prestigious universities, some alumni even consider their *alma mater* as part of their professional and personal identity (e.g., “...I was a Yale man...” or “...I was a Cambridge man...”). So, in choosing a university, many people also feel that they are choosing a part of their future persona and therefore want something more intangible than just a degree. University marketing departments are acutely aware of the significance of this issue and take it into account in their campaigns. For this reason, they devote a significant proportion of their marketing to selling the sizzle of prestige, tradition, history, and so on. This type of emotive marketing is targeted directly at the emotive heart and value set of secondary school students and their parents. In the case of prestigious secondary schools, the marketing is also targeted directly at the positioning of those schools, by creating the link between “high-end” secondary education and “high-end” tertiary education.

One obvious question that should arise after reading a collection of such words and phrases is that, even if a university has all these attributes, what do they really mean for an individual student who studies there? In practice, few people ever ask such a fundamentally important question after reading the sizzle words. Largely, this is because those words can be interpreted in any number of ways to support or reinforce a predetermined decision that is being acted upon – to make people feel good and confident about a particular university.

Some of the more sophisticated university marketing campaigns also recognise that, as with selling cars, it is important to provide reinforcement advertising to those who have already

purchased the product. The idea is that if those people are made content about their purchase then they will tell others to do the same because their taste, intelligence and decision making abilities have been confirmed by the reinforcement marketing. In university marketing, telling parents, who studied at a particular university 20 years earlier, that they had made the correct decision, because their university still has prestige and status, means that there is a higher likelihood that they will impose the same decision upon their children.

In reality, however, does it actually matter whether a university has “tradition” if its current practice is poor? Does it matter if a university is “internationally renowned” if the particular course that is being considered is known to be badly operated by local standards? Does it really matter if a university has “a proud history” if the present isn’t very good? These are all questions that people need to ask after having ingested the promotional material. In this chapter, we will therefore seek to address the various forms of marketing that are in place and what sort of questions need to be asked in response. It is only by addressing these issues that students and their parents can select the most appropriate university, free from the hyperbolae and rhetoric that are designed to dilute the fundamental issues.

It also needs to be noted, at this point, that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with universities promoting their wares any more than any other organisations – after all, they have legitimate products and need to provide information about themselves in creative ways that attract the interest of potential customers. The downside to this, however, is that in zealously promoting the sizzle

rather than the sausage, there will inevitably be occasions on which students mistakenly buy into the sizzle, rather than delving into the substance. A resulting, ill-founded decision can then be difficult to remedy. So, the old adage of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) applies as much to selecting universities as it does to buying toasters or microwave ovens – because the core marketing tactics that are in play are similar.

The most common example of universities selling the sizzle rather than the sausage appears in areas such as science, engineering and architecture, where potential students are bombarded with glamorous images of spacecraft, sky-scraper buildings; nuclear reactors, and so on. While these are genuine representations of the possibilities open to professionals in the field, the reality may be that the undergraduate course is primarily a mathematics and physics based course with a large element of analytical study required. The moral is to consider and dream of the sizzle by all means, but also seek to uncover the practical reality of what is actually offered in order to avoid making an inappropriate decision – in other words, accept the marketing for what it is.

As a starting point for examining the marketing of universities and courses, and keeping in mind the sorts of words (as listed above) that frequently appear in promotional materials, we can summarise the basic tools that are applied as follows:

- Confidence building tools (reinforcement) – reputation, history, prestige, excellence, international standing.
- Brand building tools – where the name of the organisation is promoted to the extent that it represents

something more than just a scholastic environment with opportunities for learning.

- Product suite tools – the collection and scope of courses and subjects on offer.
- Differentiation tools – new learning models, unusual courses and subjects, flexibility in courses, etc.
- Lifestyle tools – campus, location, sports facilities, surrounding attractions.
- Supporting structure tools – facilities, laboratories, computer support, services.
- Career tools – employability of graduates; the sizzle of the career itself (glamour fields and jobs).
- Industry link tools – relevance of the educational programs to university industrial partners.
- Research link tools – the connection between the university and cutting edge ideas and learning.

These tools are then applied in a range of different ways in order to get the message to the target audiences (secondary school students, parents and careers advisors). The basic vehicles for applying the marketing tools include:

- (i) Internet/university websites/popular culture websites.
- (ii) Mass media – television/radio.
- (iii) Mass media – newsprint.
- (iv) Open days.

- (v) University printed promotional literature.
- (vi) University guides / handbooks / data.

Table 4.1 is a matrix that indicates the sort of marketing tools that are typically associated with the various types of marketing vehicles.

<b>Vehicle ⇔</b>	<b>Internet</b>	<b>Radio/ Television</b>	<b>Newsprint</b>	<b>Open Days</b>	<b>University Brochures</b>	<b>University Guides/ Data</b>
Confidence						
Brand						
Product Suite						
Differentiation						
Lifestyle						
Supporting Structure						
Career						
Industry Links						
Research Links						

*Table 4.1 – University Marketing Tools and Vehicles*

Although by no means definitive, Table 4.1 provides an overview of the various vehicles used to apply the common marketing tools. Some key points to note are that the mass media outlets (newspaper, television and radio), having the broadest

audience, are generally reserved for “big picture” marketing, including the university’s brand and confidence/reinforcement strategies. Self-evidently, promoting to the broadest audience is the most costly way of getting a message out, so the message needs to be simple and clear. The more specialised the audience, however, the more detailed the information – for example, university course guides and handbooks have the most specific audience and, subsequently, the highest level of information density. In these vehicles, there is generally less content related to the big picture issues of confidence and brand.

Needless to say, regardless of which marketing vehicle is being employed, or which tool is being used to promote a university, the information that is provided still needs to be viewed as promotional in nature – in other words, an interpretation of reality rather than a complete depiction of it – the unpleasant or unattractive parts of the “complete reality” are generally missing. The elements that are required to convert the interpretation of reality into the complete depiction are ones that need to be filled in by those selecting universities or courses. Hence, for the remainder of this chapter, we look at the various marketing vehicles that are in use, and what issues need further investigation by prospective students, before making a final selection of their university.

(i) *Internet/University Websites/Popular Culture Websites*

The marketing departments in universities, like those in many other commercial organisations, have recognised the potential benefits of using the Internet as a marketing tool.

The most obvious embodiment of this is in the form of the university website. This is a recognition that many people use the Internet as a primary source of information. A quick search of Internet sites for universities around Australia, and indeed the world, highlights the fact that they are all relatively similar. Typically, the home page provides some confidence building or brand building images and slogans, coupled with some changing news items to keep people coming back to the site.

From the perspective of students, the university website generally provides the fastest and most convenient path to the most comprehensive information – in particular, serving to provide an overview of the university; the facilities; the reputation; the courses on offer (and the subjects that they contain). Typically, in studying a particular university's website with the prospect of undertaking courses, a potential student should look at elements such as:

- The overall course offerings of the university – does the university appear to have strengths in the area that is being considered?
- The faculty/department that is offering the course – how many students are enrolled in the faculty? How many academic staff are in the faculty or specific departments?
- The qualifications of the faculty/department staff – for example, if a department is offering (say) a Bachelor of Civil Engineering degree, then how

many of the academic, teaching or research staff actually have such a qualification? This is an important point because it is sometimes the case that departmental staff qualifications do not match up with what the staff are supposed to be teaching.

- Does the faculty have a reputation in the field? Does it undertake research in the area of interest? Does the faculty have links with various industries, hospitals or government departments relevant to the field?
- What specific subjects are included in the course/s under consideration? What do the subject syllabi look like? Do the syllabi match up to the marketing rhetoric? In other words, is the university selling the dream of designing spacecraft, or healing the sick, and delivering the reality of a collection of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology subjects?
- What sort of projects do undergraduate students in the faculty undertake as part of their studies? On some university websites, undergraduate student projects are presented and give some indication of the nature of the work that goes on.
- What do the graduates say about the courses that they have taken? Sometimes websites feature testimonials from graduates who have studied a

particular course and then gone on to personal success.

In addition to their websites, universities have also recognised the power of free cyberspace applications that can be used to promote their wares – particularly popular culture websites that are in use by the audience demographic to which the universities would like to appeal. For example, modern video sharing websites are frequently used to provide marketing information about universities. Sometimes universities create “stage-managed” videos that are designed to show university or course life, as though the videos were created independently by the students themselves – some vigilance is therefore required to separate genuine student videos from subliminal advertising inserted by universities.

(ii) *Mass Media – Television/Radio*

Mass media advertising seemingly has the simplest message being sold by a university. However, it is a message to which much marketing thought has been given and is potentially the least (genuinely) informative marketing employed by universities. Generally the message is confidence or brand building in nature – so, radio and television advertising focuses on the “dream”. Sometimes the dream is little more than a slogan that is designed to evoke some emotion in potential students. Most Australian universities employ a slogan that has been developed in conjunction with their marketing departments and

consultants. The slogans all have the same form, typically two to four emotive words that appear to mean something more than they actually do or, perhaps, just to inspire – “Dare to Dream”, “Passion and Knowledge”, “The Future Today”, etc. These either endeavour to sell vision, aspiration, history, prestige, tradition, or even the notion that the university is “state-of-the-art” in education. Perhaps the dream is some completely new learning paradigm with fancy sounding titles – “dynamic learning”, “pro-active learning”, “experiential learning”, and so on. In other words, the allure of learning without the burden of hard work and study.

Sometimes, radio and television advertising goes even further and attempts to sell the dream of what happens after studying at the particular university – healing the sick and curing disease; solving world poverty; fixing the environment, etc. Essentially the dream is tailored to whatever big issues are perceived (by marketers) to be of importance to potential students at the time – for example, the environment; global warming, etc. Make no mistake, university marketers and their consultants spend significant sums of money on market research and focus groups to determine exactly which emotive buttons to push with students and their parents.

For this reason, students seeking to select a university and a course should avoid reading too much significance into the mass media message of a university, as it carries little more weight or relevance than that employed to sell commodity products in a supermarket. The primary role of the mass media message is reassurance and confidence (“...if you pick

*our university, then you're making the right choice because...").* The best advice that can be given to students (and their parents), who are evaluating potential universities, is to ignore the mass media messages altogether because they tend to be highly manipulative and add nothing to the serious issues of university and course selection.

Some mass media messages in regard to possible university study areas don't actually emanate from the universities themselves. These are the sorts of messages that come through the mass media and which have a significant impact upon those seeking to select various university courses. In particular, these emanate from popular culture television shows and movies – the two most obvious examples being legal and medical dramas. These tend to provide very glamorised and exciting perspectives of various professions, generally omitting the mundane and repetitive elements that are the mainstay of those who actually work in real-world versions of those jobs. For example, legal dramas focus on large scale cases involving murders or corporate litigations when, in reality, many legal professionals spend their lives on repetitive issues such as disputes over neighbourhood fence lines or payments over car repairs. Medical dramas focus on exotic diseases where medicos use their skills to revive good-looking young patients, when the bulk of real medical work is in mundane complaints and degenerative disorders of older patients that simply don't improve regardless of the treatment.

These fiction-based messages, being constant, consistent and subliminal, have an impact on the sorts of courses and

careers that people choose. More importantly, because the professions chosen for mass media are ones which make a good base for fictional human drama, the bulk of other professions never get a screening – so there is the biased and superficial (fictional) representation of the professional world that needs to be taken into account. Students need to consider whether they are making a choice based on a glamorised image or reality. In the modern media, there are unlikely to be television shows or movies which showcase the talents of economists or biochemists or accountants or actuaries or mechanical engineers or linguists or statisticians, and so on. Yet these sorts of careers may, in reality, provide a more interesting life choice for some students than those that have been chosen for fictional media dramatisation.

The important lesson here is that those who are seeking careers in areas that are glamorised through fictional media should first consider consulting actual practitioners in the field – or perhaps even gaining work experience in the area while in secondary school. This sort of advice and experience is invaluable and could save students from making poor career choices, leaving them to find careers that are of genuine interest.

(iii) *Mass Media – Newsprint*

Originally a mainstay of university marketing, newsprint has diminished in relative importance because of

the advent of the Internet. Nevertheless, it is still used by universities around the world for a number of reasons:

- Brand reinforcement
- Getting succinct messages to a mass audience in a short space of time (e.g., *“Open Day is on Sunday August 12<sup>th</sup>”*)
- Direct selling of products – for example, a university may be offering places in a particular program/course.
- Lift-out magazines or newsletters that glamorise a university; course or research far more than is justified by the reality.

In general, it is unlikely that students will use newsprint marketing to make life-changing decisions about the courses that they will undertake so, apart from its direct selling value, the real impact here comes from the brand reinforcement message and the “sloganism” (*“Dare to Dream...Ranked as one of the top 100 universities in the world...”*)

(iv) *Open Days*

One of the most significant elements in university marketing, and one which potential students should take most seriously, is the traditional university “open day”. The nature of open days has changed as students have become more sophisticated, and as students come armed with their own preliminary information derived from the Internet and other

sources. Nevertheless, open days provide an opportunity for students to experience the campus; to view laboratories; to speak with academic and administrative staff; to look at research projects, and other major facilities in the university.

Originally, open days were operated essentially as fairs in which the doors of the universities were, as the event-name suggests, “opened” and outsiders could walk around. However, many of the university staff that are on hand during the current generation of open days are acutely aware of the fact that students are street-smart, and want answers to specific questions and concerns. This means that to get the best out of an open day, secondary students generally need to do some preparatory work – at the very least to identify a limited range of courses they may wish to focus upon in terms of acquiring more information.

For many secondary school students, the preparatory work for open days can be undertaken in Year 11, with the serious visits taking place in Year 12. In Year 11, students can get a general feel for the various university campuses and, perhaps, decide whether or not they would like to spend four to six years of their lives in them – students should have some degree of comfort and affinity for the campus as much as for the courses and university.

Another, not to be overlooked, feature of open days is that they physically present the challenge for students to actually get to a particular campus. The physical location of a campus; public transport; parking; residential accommodation, etc. are all significant, practical issues in the lives of university

students, and they do need to be considered. If, in the final analysis, a student elects to go to a university that requires two hours of daily travel, then this will have a significant impact on lifestyle, study and learning, compared to one that is within short walking distance. The availability and the cost of parking, on and around a campus, is also a significant issue and can contribute to the cost of education. It also needs to be remembered that open days are generally held on weekends, so, in assessing practical issues such as traffic impact on travel time, and the availability of parking, one has to consider that the weekday situation may present far more challenges in terms of time limitations, etc.

At a higher level, open days have particular importance to those students who intend to take courses that require significant laboratory and technical infrastructure. Open days provide the opportunity to compare universities in terms of their equipment and laboratories. From an undergraduate perspective, determining whether or not universities have adequate laboratories to genuinely operate the courses for which they are charging fees is quite difficult – how is one supposed to determine what is required when one doesn't know what is required?

As a starting point for the open day evaluation of infrastructure, students need to note that there are different types of laboratories that exist within universities. Firstly, there are the research laboratories, which most students will never use as undergraduates. Research infrastructure in these laboratories can exist in the form of large machines or facilities

which are designed for use by a limited number of people (academic staff; research staff and postgraduate research students). Typically, an undergraduate student may only use these for specialist projects in the latter years of his/her degree program – sometimes, such equipment is used for demonstration purposes in undergraduate programs but not for experimental work.

The type of infrastructure that undergraduates will use most often is designed specifically for a large volume of students. In other words, laboratories are composed of many benches and contain many sets of the same equipment in order to allow numerous students to undertake experimental work at the same time.

In the context of students who wish to undertake a degree program in an area that requires development of “hands-on” experimental skills, the issue of laboratories and technical support is, arguably, of far greater importance than the brand or prestige of the university that is offering the program. Ironically, because undergraduate laboratories and their technical support staffing are also one of the highest cost components in the university system, it is here where universities attempt to cut costs, to the detriment of the students. Cost cutting is usually manifested in a number of forms, including the replacement of physical laboratories with computer simulation; minimisation of technical staffing; the replacement of professional apparatus with student experimental “kits”, and so on. These are the warning signals that students should look out for during their open day visits.

During open days, many universities endeavour to reinforce the sizzle and only allow students to have access to the research laboratories, which contain glamorous, high-cost equipment. For this reason, students wishing to undertake undergraduate programs in areas such as science, medicine, engineering, etc., need to look past the sizzle and ask to view the substance. The following questions need to be asked by students wishing to undertake courses that require practical laboratory work:

- Excluding computer laboratories and simulation laboratories, how many actual laboratories does the university have that are specifically designed for undergraduate work in the course I would like to do?
- Do the undergraduate laboratories contain real-world equipment or only student experimental kits?
- How many hours per week in each year of the course are devoted to hands-on laboratory work?
- How many sets of equipment are available for each laboratory, and how many students are allocated to each set of equipment during laboratory sessions?
- How many laboratory technicians does the department/faculty have that are dedicated to supporting undergraduate programs?

- Can you please show us some typical undergraduate laboratories and provide us with written examples of some typical undergraduate laboratory experiments?

The answers to the above questions, when compiled and compared across the range of universities that are being considered, should have a significant impact on the final selection of a university. If the staff presenting at open days cannot answer these questions, students (and/or their parents) should contact their secondary school careers advisors and have them formally contact the relevant faculties and get these issues addressed.

The undergraduate development of hands-on skills and systematic experimentation techniques is critical to many university courses. The moral here is to use the open day experience to ensure that the university has a genuine commitment to the programs that are being offered, and that this is manifested in high quality laboratories.

Another open day benefit is that it offers the opportunity for potential students to talk with current undergraduate students to determine their feelings about the program. This provides a good “from the horses mouth” account of the actual nature of the study. Typical questions to ask current students may include:

- What sort of things were you looking for in the course before you came to this university, and has

the course subsequently lived up to your expectations?

- Do you have friends/colleagues at other universities in similar courses and, if so, do you know if their experiences are better or worse than yours?
- What are the things that you most like about the course and what aspects do you most dislike?
- If you had the opportunity to start over, would you still select this university and course or do you think you might make a different selection?

These sorts of questions will ultimately provide you with far more insight into the university and the course than the smoke and mirrors of brochures, television advertising and handbooks. Of course, one also needs to be aware that, by definition, the students who generally participate in open days (as volunteers) are those that are most favourably disposed to the university and the course. More valuable information/insight might be obtained from those that commenced the course and ultimately transferred to other universities or dropped out altogether. It may therefore be useful to ask students presenting at open day whether they have any colleagues who were dissatisfied and whether it would be possible to talk to them.

(v) *University Printed Promotional Literature*

To the extent that a brochure for a car or a television set is a representation of the actual car or television set, so too, one can assume, the printed promotional material for a university is to some extent a representation of the university. Of course it is not the total representation but, rather, a collection of positive attributes that have to be scrutinised in the context of advertising.

Generally, printed promotional material about a university tends to focus on the “feel good” aspects of the university – prestige, longevity, stability, etc. Quite often, universities will expend large sums of money on the printed material so that it has a certain visual attribute; so that the paper has a feel of quality, and so on. This form of marketing is largely to sell the brand and the sizzle rather than the substance. From a prospective student’s point of view, it is one of the least useful sources of information in regard to university selection – other than, perhaps, to provide a broad overview of the university.

(vi) *University Guides and Data*

There are various guides available that compare and rank the attributes of Australian universities. These provide a very useful source of information, if for no other reason than because they tend to be independent of the universities. Most secondary students seeking to select university courses will invariably refer to university comparison guides as a starting

point in selecting a university. Typically, guides provide information relating to student satisfaction; teaching quality; research quality; reputation, campus quality, and so on. In ranking the various attributes of universities, such guides provide a hotel-style star ranking, typically between one and five.

The only downside to university guides is that, like all other forms of measurement, they tend to impact upon the quantities being measured. All Australian universities are acutely aware of the impact that university guides have on the selection of courses and universities. For this reason, universities try to focus their strategies on ensuring that they perform well on the measurement criteria that are employed. There is nothing wrong with this in the sense that if universities consciously decide to improve student satisfaction, for example, then they are achieving a positive outcome. The only disadvantage of the process is that sometimes universities seek to only remedy the parameters that relate to the ranking, at the expense of a more genuine approach to improving, say, student satisfaction.

One potential pitfall of ranking schemes, which follows from this, is that they tend to encourage systems in universities that are favourable to student perceptions rather than to the long term interests of the students. For example, it may be that students prefer undertaking computer simulation laboratory type work rather than actual laboratory work using professional equipment. A university that panders to students' short term preferences may perform better in a

university guide than one that recognises that students may not like laboratory work but need to do it anyway in the interests of their professional development.

Another pitfall example which arises from time to time in university comparison guides relates to class sizes. Some universities operate undergraduate lectures with 400-500 students, while others have smaller lectures of 100-200 students. In a university ranking guide, the students who are subjected to larger lecture group sizes may feel that they are receiving a poorer education than those who are in smaller classes. The reality, however, may be that the larger class sizes enable the university to provide better infrastructure in areas such as libraries, laboratories, computing, campus facilities, etc. It may also be that the university operating the larger class sizes provides more small-size tutorials to compensate for the larger classes. The moral is that it is not always evident to students, while they are undergraduates, what is in their best interests – sometimes this only becomes apparent years after they graduate. Another common example of this is where universities offer challenging subjects at a higher level, which require more effort and sometimes provide fewer rewards in terms of high marks. Again, in the short term, students may feel disadvantaged but, years after graduation, in retrospect, they may grow to appreciate the significance of a more challenging environment.

Nevertheless, even with the inherent disadvantages of a ranking system, a university comparison guide is an important starting point in understanding what is on offer and how

various universities compare overall. There is a significant amount of groundwork that is undertaken by those who prepare such guides, and this spares students and their parents the arduous task of finding the individual pieces of information and compiling them.

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In addition to all these conventional marketing vehicles, many universities also have two additional elements that they proffer to attract students:

- Cocktail Courses.
- Fad Degrees.

Cocktail courses are those that include double degrees (e.g., Bachelor of Commerce and Law; Bachelor of Engineering and Computer Science) as well as combined Bachelors and Master's degrees. In Australia, these tend to be very popular with students because they create an impression of greater flexibility in the professional world. In reality, universities heavily promote such programs for the simple reason that they increase revenues by up to 20% with only marginal increases in costs. While the educational merits of cocktail programs are somewhat debateable, the potential career benefit for graduates is that if they can't get a job with Degree "A" then they may be able to get one with Degree "B" – alternatively, a graduate may find, after several years of study, that they are not interested in Profession "A" but would rather pursue Profession "B". The practical reality of cocktail degrees is that,

despite earning two qualifications, a graduate is often seen as a genuine professional in “A” and someone with only a basic grounding in “B”.

On top of the limited educational value of cocktail degrees, one also has to consider that they cost graduates, at the very least, an additional year of professional earnings, over and above the cost of the degree itself. Even if a cocktail degree provided a starting salary bonus over a single degree, it could take more than a decade to recover the loss of the additional year’s salary. Over and above this, one has to consider that a graduate with a cocktail degree is not comparing himself/herself in the workforce with single degree graduate (as university marketing suggests) but, rather, with a peer who has a single degree and a year of work experience. Such a peer may in practice be earning up to 30-40% more than a cocktail degree student in his/her first year of professional life.

Students considering cocktail degrees should study university marketing material and course guides very carefully. Most universities have realised that if they provide a four-year single degree, followed by a single year program to achieve the double degree, then many students will drop out after the first degree. For this reason, and to preserve course earnings, most cocktail degrees have been deliberately intermeshed so that one cannot graduate without having fulfilled the requirements of both degrees over a five year period. This generally means that there is little chance of going back to an original single degree program after a decision has been made to apply for a cocktail degree – hence the requirement for vigilance in selection, and reference to actual course guides rather than marketing material before making a decision.

“Fad” degrees are the other mechanism that universities have chosen to use to attract students over the past decade, as a marketing vehicle, and potential students should be very wary of such offerings. Ultimately, a basic degree needs to last a lifetime even though, in the modern world, graduates will inevitably choose to undertake further forms of study later in life. A good first degree, however, sets the groundwork for a professional mindset and a professional career, and should offer far more than just a collection of subjects in a particular field. It should build depth; it should provide a systematic approach to learning and development; it should broaden the mind, and so on.

In the past decade, however, universities have found that there are student markets to be tapped by tugging on the heartstrings, and constructing degrees that appear to address student concerns at any particular point in time – for example, “Bachelor of Science (Global Warming)” or “Bachelor of Science (Stem Cells)”. By virtue of the fact that these are fads as far as the media is concerned, and regardless of their validity as areas of knowledge or study, many students believe that they will go on in perpetuity, and hence that there is a future in having such a specialisation. The universities are fully aware of this, and play upon the emotional attachment to current fads and leverage the media hype to attract students.

The problem with such fad degree programs is that they lack any level of fundamental pedagogical integrity - basically because they are invariably little more than a collection of semi-related subjects that have been abstracted from a range of other (usually) already existing courses. These subjects are then cobbled together to create something that appears sensible in the context of the fad.

They are flawed because they are founded on a desire to capture a commercial student market rather than address a long-term basic learning need or a real area of science, medicine, economics, etc. Worse still, from a student perspective, media fads (regardless of their importance) seldom last more than a few years – a decade at most – after which they are either forgotten or else given a new (more “media friendly”) title. This means that, after a few years, graduates can be left with a largely worthless qualification in an area that nobody even remembers as having been important.

As a general rule, and regardless of the marketing hyperbolae surrounding fad degrees, students should, wherever possible, seek to acquire basic graduate qualifications that are generic in nature and well established. Moreover, if these are tied to a specific profession, the qualifications should be linked to historically proven and recognised fields – for example, “Bachelor of Science (Chemistry)” or “Bachelor of Engineering (Civil)”. Generic and established qualifications will always have greater credibility in the workforce in the short term because the attributes of former graduates are well understood. They will also have greater longevity in terms of a lifelong career. If students do have a taste for fad areas, there is generally ample opportunity for greater specialisation in subsequent postgraduate programs – the undergraduate programs should be selected on depth, history and longevity.

### **Chapter 4 Summary:**

- (i) *Universities tend to adopt ethical marketing approaches but these still need to be recognised for what they are – that is, one-sided representations of reality.*
- (ii) *University marketing materials should only be used as a starting point for university selection – in order to make a meaningful decision students need to do some of their own groundwork, and this includes asking (or seeking the answers to) a range of questions.*
- (iii) *Students endeavouring to undertake courses requiring significant laboratory infrastructure (science, engineering, medicine, etc.) need to be very vigilant in selecting universities and courses – undergraduate laboratories and technical staffing are where universities most try to cut corners at the expense of students. Students need to benchmark the facilities at various universities.*
- (iv) *If universities refuse to cooperate in providing additional information (e.g., on laboratories), then students/parents should seek to have secondary school careers teachers write to the universities and formally request responses to the relevant queries.*
- (v) *Students should try to separate marketing fiction from reality – the best way to do this is to understand the nature of the professional work that will ensue after a university degree; and to understand what sorts of expertise; infrastructure and support will be required during the degree program. If possible, start by talking to a range of professionals who are already in the field to get a range of views.*

- (vi) *Students should be very wary of cocktail degree programs that are marketed by universities – these need to be studied very carefully in terms of exit strategies in the event that students decide that they do not wish to complete the cocktail of degrees.*
- (vii) *Students should avoid fad degree programs, regardless of the marketing hyperbolae that surround them – if possible choose the most generic and well established undergraduate programs available, and leave specialisation to postgraduate study.*

