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Selecting a University

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

- What techniques should be used to select a university?
- How can students determine whether a university is genuinely committed to the courses that it offers?
- How important is it to select the correct university?

Abraham Lincoln once cautioned people to,

“...bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing”.

This point is profoundly important to those who are about to select a university for undergraduate study in the sense that, ultimately, it is not the university that will determine success or failure in later life but the individual and their resolve, integrity, motives and passion for what they do. Graduating from the world’s greatest university, without a passion or commitment to achieving something thereafter, is as likely a recipe for failure as is graduating from the world’s worst university, with a passion for achievement, likely to be a recipe for success.

A university, even the world’s best university, is really little more than a collection of buildings and real estate filled with a range of academics and students that come and go over time. There is no magical entity that is a “Harvard” or “Cambridge” other than in the mindset of those who work or study there at any instant in time. Einstein did not become important because he worked at the Princeton Institute but the Princeton Institute (an inanimate collection of buildings and real-estate), it could be argued, became important because Einstein was there, as were numerous other great scientists of the 20th Century.

Every student then needs to ask himself/herself whether they are selecting a university because they expect some magical dust of greatness to descend upon them, by virtue of having attended a particular university, or because they themselves intend to make the

university greater by virtue of their presence and subsequent life achievements. If it is the former, then it is almost certain that the choice of university will have little impact on success and, if it is the latter, then the university's impact will stem from the inspiration, encouragement and guidance that it provides. In other words, as Lincoln observed, the university is merely "one thing" and a resolve to contribute and succeed is another.

Having understood that a university is not, of itself, a key to success, there is merit in the argument that the collection of people who work and study in a particular university at a particular time can inspire an individual to achieve greater outcomes because of the synergies that exist between the individual and the collegiate environment. So, in simple terms, a person with the resolve to succeed in some chosen life path is likely to succeed despite the choice of university but, if carefully chosen, the university should help to inspire and to motivate.

With this fundamental understanding in mind, there are then three basic elements to selecting a university for undergraduate study. These are:

- (i) Considering universities in the context of their relevance to the career and/or life path that students expect to ensue following graduation.
- (ii) Considering universities in the context of their real commitment to the course which is being considered – including staffing; infrastructure (specific and general); undergraduate technical support, and links with relevant partners (industry; hospitals; legal entities, etc.)

- (iii) Considering the overall ranking and reputation of various universities.

Again, here it needs to be emphasised that we do not refer to universities simply in the context of buildings, real-estate, or even some historical documents that suggest that both of these have existed for centuries but, rather, universities in the context of the people who currently work and study within them.

The three elements in the selection process really need to be undertaken in sequence in order to provide a systematic analysis of what is on offer and what will best suit a student's requirements. Elements (i) and (ii) are critical to the selection process and (iii), while important, needs to be relegated to tertiary consideration in order to avoid a situation where students buy in to a crafted or coincidental illusion or legacy, rather than current reality.

Ironically, in Australia, it is generally Element (iii) that receives the greatest attention because there is a perception that the results achieved in the final year of secondary schooling are a voucher that is to be used to buy a course and university, and the greater the results, the more prestigious the course and the university that needs to be bought – otherwise, there is a view that a portion of the voucher generated by secondary school academic results has been wasted. This misconception is particularly common in the parents of secondary school students (“...*what kind of degree program can my son get with these high marks he got?*”). It also has an element of the stereotypical image of parents living vicariously through their children (“...*my son got into the highest entry score degree program in the best university...*”). The danger with allowing such decision making to progress to an illogical conclusion is that those who make ill-

informed decisions about degree programs can end up performing poorly during the program, and subsequently as professionals once they graduate, because they simply don't have the passion required to achieve success, despite having the requisite academic grades. It is dangerous to confuse academic results and illusions of university and course prestige with lifelong ambitions and passions.

Just as secondary school learning is not the end of the process of human challenge, neither is university learning an end in itself. It is merely the beginning of a new set of challenges. A few months after graduation, when a professional is in the workforce, memories of the university that has been left behind are usually distant, and it becomes apparent that any cachet value that was derived from the prestige of that institution has been largely expended in acquiring that first professional position. Thereafter, any thought that someone, in the modern business world, will provide that individual with lifelong career opportunities simply because they graduated from a Cambridge or Harvard type university, and despite their record of professional performance, is self delusional. So, the simplistic view of buying lifelong prestige with university choices is misguided and naïve. However, the choice of university does have some consequences in terms of the types of individuals that it creates, and we will look at this issue herein.

In terms of the university entry "voucher" that is created from secondary school results, it needs to be remembered that, for all the different methods of assessment that are employed, academic grades are still significantly a reflection of rote learning and memorisation skills rather than innate intellect – they are even less relevant to the emotional capacity or willingness of an individual to perform a

particular professional role. For example, someone with a perfect secondary school score in science subjects may be completely unsuited to a role as a surgeon because of an intrinsic distaste for anatomy and human dissection.

The potential disconnect between high scholastic results in secondary school and the particular emotional intelligence required for some professions can also be a serious issue – particularly in areas such as law, management, social work, medicine, psychology, veterinary science, etc. A high intellectual quotient and an introverted personality type, or low emotional intelligence quotient, may be a recipe for disaster in professions which are based on elements of human interaction and an understanding of human nature as much as intellect.

It is therefore important, from the outset, for potential university students to try and consider their entire personality, and their interests, passions and dislikes, before simply considering how to use a scholastic voucher to select a university. Scholastic achievement provides a tool for achieving other life objectives – but, however satisfying, it should not be considered as the end in itself. The critical point is that the university selection that takes place needs to be based on the entirety of the individual not just his or her scholastic capacity to “buy in” to a particular institution.

In addition to these issues, it is important for students to understand that university entry scores for various courses are not simply determined by the complexity or scholastic requirements of a course, but are largely a reflection of:

- Positioning and branding of the university.

- Demand/popularity and availability of particular courses or professions.
- Salary/prestige levels associated with particular professions.

These issues are often incorrectly confused with the intellectual merit or rigour of the courses themselves, but there are numerous examples to the contrary. One could argue that the intellectual rigour and challenge of a Bachelor of Science degree in physics or mathematics would be significantly greater than that of medicine or law but, in general, the latter two have higher entry scores for a range of historical and perceived social prestige reasons, as well as their established track record in the 20th Century of attracting higher starting salaries.

With these basic issues covered, it is now possible to look at the three elements to selecting a university, commencing with the most important – the relevance of the university to the student's intended career and/or life path.

This is the most fundamental issue that needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, it is also an issue which requires significant soul-searching on the part of the student, generally at a time when they do not have sufficient life experience to make such a judgement call. It also requires some understanding of the sorts of universities that exist in Australia and the sorts of individuals/professionals that they create. Essentially, Australian universities fall into a few broad categories, these being:

- Research intensive universities.
- Applied/industry-oriented universities.

- Life/Social Science-oriented universities.

These are shown mapped onto a quadrant diagram in Figure 5.1.

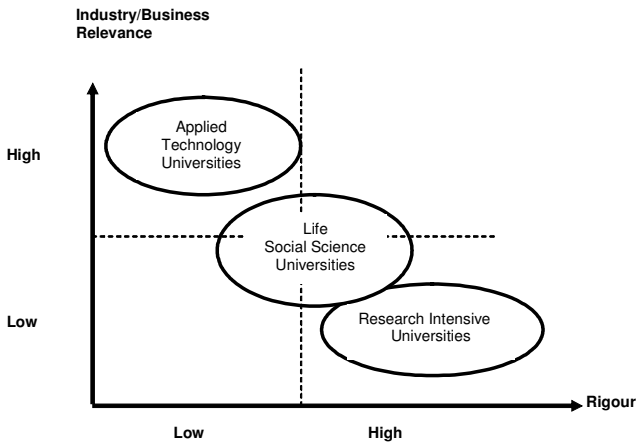


Figure 5.1 – Quadrant Diagram of University Types in Australia

Needless to say, the categorisations in Figure 5.1 are not hard and fast – they are just an indication of the sorts of emphases that exist within the system. There are some research intensive universities that perform well in terms of graduate employability, and there are some applied universities that perform well in rigour. And, again, it needs to be stressed that just because a student selects a university with a high degree of scholastic rigour it does not mean that they will ultimately perform well in a career on that basis – and neither may someone who chooses an applied university perform well in graduate employment. However, at their core, university cultures will inculcate particular mindsets in the individuals who

study within them, just because they have a propensity to hire academic staff with those sorts of mindsets. So, as previously noted, it isn't the buildings, real-estate and history that will intrinsically alter the course of a student's career but, rather, the mindsets of the students and the staff within the university.

It is also self evident that since universities don't label themselves according to the diagram in Figure 5.1, a student seeking a particular type of university has the task of identifying which universities have which particular traits. And, of course, there is a spectrum of traits that cross various boundaries. In general, however, there are a few defining attributes that broadly differentiate between universities:

- *Research intensive universities* which have scholastic rigour as an ethos generally have strong departments/faculties and research in the so-called traditional "hard sciences" (i.e., those sciences based upon maths and physics). As a general rule, because universities founded on scholastic rigour have a historical genesis, they also contain traditional high-profile areas such as medicine and law.
- *Applied, technologically-focused universities* tend to have strong departments and faculties in hard sciences but these are focused more on application rather than the science itself. The areas typically include engineering and applied science, as well as business and information technology.

- *The life/social science universities* tend to focus on a combination of the so-called “soft sciences” or “wet sciences” (chemistry, biology, etc.), social areas, arts and business. These tend to be associated with professions in areas such as biotechnology, nursing, teaching, social work, and so on.

In the state of Victoria, for example, The University of Melbourne would be illustrative of a research intensive university; RMIT University would be illustrative of an applied university, and Latrobe University would be illustrative of a life/social sciences university.

Students will spend between four to six years of their lives, and often more, at a university, so it is not surprising that some of the culture will be transferred to the student during their studies.

Students who study at a research intensive university are likely to be surrounded by academics and researchers who are focused upon pure research; have little interest in the specific, practical/business outcomes of that research but a strong interest in rigour and systematic investigation – these universities are driven by staff with a propensity for analysis rather than synthesis.

Students who study at applied universities will be exposed to staff who are used to problem-solving based upon industry requirements and timeframes, and with a commitment to the business drivers that govern research and development. These staff are driven by the desire for synthesis rather than analysis.

Students at life/social science universities will be exposed to staff who are driven by societal needs and the desire to build social

structures, rather than hard business principles or mathematically definable fields.

Whether by serendipity or a range of other complex factors, or just plain coincidence, those students who study at particular university types do tend to go on to particular roles in society. Those in research intensive universities, perhaps because of a focus on fundamentals and rigour in analysis, tend to go on to either research careers or senior, strategic leadership roles in industry. Those in applied universities tend to go on to more technocratic roles, and those in life/social science universities tend to go into roles in community, politics, media, etc.

There are, of course, other “underpinning” factors associated with various university types that also have the effect of channelling people into particular careers. Many of the older, research intensive universities have channelled people into senior, strategic roles simply by virtue of being the only universities available for study in the middle of the 20th Century – since few people in Australia in business in the 1950s and 1960s had tertiary qualifications, those who did (invariably from the (now) establishment universities) ultimately ended up at the top of the business ladder. It was also the case that many of those who did undertake university study in the middle of the 20th Century tended to do so because of parents who were already well established in business, law or medicine. Again, there was a dynastic element to the success, as much as any intrinsic quality of the universities themselves.

None of these dynastic elements are as strong in the modern world as they were in the middle of the 20th Century. In Australia, in particular, large scale immigration has changed the face of business,

medicine, politics, science and law. The levels of education are higher across the board, so having a degree is no longer a ticket to success in any field. Moreover, with the intensity of international business competition, there is less and less interest in the cachet value of degrees and universities, and far more interest in the ability of individuals to deliver tangible results. This is one reason why students need to look well beyond historical factors in selecting a university for study.

Nevertheless, a student with a passion for a technocratic career, and with little or no interest in long-term strategic management positions, may be better served by a relationship with an applied technological university rather than a research intensive one. Conversely, a student with a passing interest in science or technology but with a long-term goal of strategic management may be better placed in a research intensive university, even though they have no interest in research itself.

The sorts of staff and students that various universities attract can also have a direct impact upon an individual student. For example, universities where academic staff are well placed in terms of research are far better equipped to provide opportunities for postgraduate scholarships and study, should a student wish to do this at the end of their undergraduate degree. Academic staff with strong links to industry or political, medical or social work systems may also be far better placed to provide graduates with direct forays into the professional workforce than those in universities who have pure research staff.

The students themselves can also alter the form of learning within a particular institution. For example, an institution which is

filled with high scholastic achievers may have the effect of driving an individual student to greater heights by virtue of the fierce competition – it may also have the reverse effect and cause an individual student to develop self doubts. In postgraduate courses, the student body can be very important, particularly if one is undertaking, say, a Master's degree in business administration – a good university will attract industry/business high achievers, and individual students will be able to form a network of potentially powerful allies that may be invaluable as contacts in later life.

In terms of long-term career goals, the same is also true of an undergraduate group of high achievers – many will go on to achieve high positions in business, industry, medicine, law, politics, etc. A student who believes that he/she wants to strive for high level positions in these sorts of fields has to understand that they will need allies to achieve such long term goals – these are not goals that can generally be achieved by an individual operating in isolation. Such allies can often be found by creating a network of friends at undergraduate level, who can help each other move up through the various professions.

It also needs to be remembered, however, in looking at the academic cohort to which one will attach oneself, that each will have his/her own motivations for their study. High scholastic achievers sometimes enjoy high scholastic achievement for the sake of high scholastic achievement, rather than because of a passion for a particular field itself. If this is the case, then a student with a lifelong passion for a field, rather than the scholastic achievement, may become disillusioned by his/her cohort.

All of these issues sound rather daunting but, in summary, come down to a few basic points. Specifically, when selecting a university in the context of life/career aspirations, students need to:

- Consider their complete “person”, not just their scholastic achievement – does the university fit in with the entire individual and his/her aspirations?
- Distinguish clearly between scholastic achievement, university entry scores and life/career aspirations – they are not necessarily related.
- Recognise the different types of universities and learning environments that exist in relation to long term ambitions.
- Consider the student cohort that will exist at various universities – for this will have an impact on the individual during learning, and in later life as part of a long term collegiate network.

We now move on to the second element that needs to be considered in selecting a university and course of study – the actual commitment of the university to a particular field. This is something that was touched upon in Chapter 4 in the context of university marketing. It is also something that potential students take for granted on the assumption that a university would never consider operating a particular course unless it had the staffing and physical resources that were required to do so. Sadly, this is not necessarily the case in Australia, and it is therefore a case of *caveat emptor* for all potential students, particularly for those seeking to study in areas of science and engineering, which are resource intensive.

University undergraduate courses require a number of elements to be present in order to provide a proper learning environment for students:

- Physical resources (buildings, laboratories, equipment, etc.).
- Academic resources (expertise in the particular field)
- Supporting resources (laboratory staff, tutors, demonstrators).
- Linkages (to industry, hospitals, law firms, professional bodies, etc.).
- Recognition/accreditation by professional bodies that enables an individual to practice a particular discipline.

Without these sorts of resources, students cannot necessarily get the sort of learning experience that one would expect at an international level.

In many areas of study (e.g., medicine, engineering, law, psychology, etc.), there are professional bodies and societies who have a role in ensuring that undergraduate courses are delivered to a minimum standard acceptable to those bodies. The starting point for students seeking to undertake courses related to a particular profession is therefore to always check the professional accreditation of the course they are seeking to undertake at a particular university. Does the course have national accreditation? Is the national accreditation transferable to international accreditation and, if so, in which countries? Without accreditation, it is possible that a degree

may be completely worthless, particularly in areas such as law or medicine.

Even if a course is accredited, it is important for students to understand what the accreditation actually means. For example, does an accredited degree in psychology actually allow a graduate to practise as a psychologist, or does it simply mean that the relevant body recognises it as a course? This is an important point because it goes to the core of how committed a particular university is to a course of study – does the university follow the area through to full practising accreditation?

The next point to keep in mind is that formal accreditation only signifies that a university/course has achieved a minimum standard. Many students will want to know how a university and course benchmark at a national or international level. At a national level, there are university guides which provide a hotel-style star ranking for all of Australia's universities and these cover a range of areas including teaching, student satisfaction, employability, etc. At an international level, there are numerous organisations that rank universities from all over the world. Some of the more famous ones include the Jiao Tong rankings of world universities and the Times Higher Education Supplement rankings. The latest rankings can readily be found and downloaded from the Internet.

Each international ranking system uses a different set of criteria, so it is important to understand which criteria are being used before actually examining the rankings themselves. For example, a ranking system may have, as one of its parameters, the number of Nobel Prize winners working at a particular university – if this is not of concern to a student, then he/she may choose to look at another

ranking system. As a general rule, universities that are highly ranked internationally because of particular disciplines will have a very strong commitment to staffing and/or infrastructure for those disciplines, especially in the context of research.

The most relevant issues for students, however, come down to how much commitment universities have to investing in staffing, infrastructure, support and linkages specifically aimed at the undergraduate programs. Sometimes, this commitment is visibly evident – some universities have extensive laboratories and some don't. Sometimes, students have to search for signs of commitment – for example, to determine how many technical staff are provided for support of undergraduate programs.

There are also intangible factors relating to commitment that need to be examined – for example, how many of the academic staff teaching in the program of interest actually have the same qualifications themselves? Do the majority of the staff teaching in, say, civil engineering actually have civil engineering degrees or do they have maths and physics degrees? This is a very important point because programs that are not staffed by professionals with basic qualifications in the same area do not have the same level of focus and strength as those programs that do.

Another aspect relating to university commitment in the context of staffing is to know how many of the academic staff are actually active members of the profession in which they are providing education – for example, how many lecturers in medicine are actually practicing medicine themselves? How closely linked are they to the profession, rather than just the course notes? These issues relate to the genuine commitment of a university to ensure that its

education is actually linked to the profession rather than just an abstract entity in its own right. In the final analysis, students can always learn the fundamentals on their own from text books but it is the professional insights, examples and anecdotes that complete the learning picture.

As a general rule-of-thumb, in considering the sorts of universities that provide the best overall proposition for students in Australia, the graph that was presented in Figure 2.1 is particularly important. The graph shows the relationship between university performance (in both education and research) and the size of a university, in terms of academic and research staff numbers. Although the performance figures in that graph were derived from one particular study, the trends are similar for a range of different performance criteria. Essentially, in publicly funded Australian universities, the larger the university, the better the overall performance. Moreover, the larger the university, the more stable the governance; the larger the resources available, and so on. In other words, as a rule-of-thumb, the larger the university, the greater the commitment to its constituent disciplines.

Clearly, universities cannot simply market themselves in terms of size, so modern university marketing dictates that institutions need to differentiate themselves in other ways. In the case of undergraduate learning, this is achieved through creating the illusion of a commitment to miraculous new learning techniques – “dynamic learning”, “active learning”, “adaptive learning”, “multimodal learning”, “distance learning” – the list goes on and on. Sometimes, universities claim that they have revolutionary new “learning models” of various kinds. While much of this is little more than

marketing gobbledy-gook, it does tend to make it more difficult for students to determine how much real commitment universities have to the core discipline which is being scrutinised for selection.

Students interests are perhaps best served by understanding that, regardless of the marketing gobbledy-gook, university undergraduate learning is fundamentally the transition from the taught environment of secondary schools to one of independent learning, guided by a framework which is gradually weakened in order to wean people away from teaching and move them towards genuine independence. This has not changed for centuries, despite the rhetoric, and despite the advent of computing, wireless communications, multimedia and so on. To this extent, it is important that students are not misled by the smoke and mirrors of seemingly meaningful words that do not fundamentally alter the genuine commitments of resources, linkages and recognition that are required to make good undergraduate education.

Most, if not all, universities will claim that they are fully committed to particular programs of study. The reality is that some are simply not. It is therefore left to the students to delve into the above issues and determine the real extent of a university's commitment before subscribing to a particular course. The simple rule is to always select a university based upon real commitment over and above any perceived prestige or status factors. Remember, the university is one element in the context of a lifelong set of goals – it is not the end in itself.

We now come to the final university selection element for consideration, and that is the ranking, status or standing of the university. As noted above, it is likely that a university that is highly

ranked at an international level, on one of the numerous indices, will have substance behind it, notwithstanding the fact that the rankings are designed to indicate strengths in specific areas (e.g., number of Nobel Prizes). It does need to be re-iterated, however, in the context of Figure 2.1, that performance in university rankings is generally related to university size (in terms of academic/research staff) rather than any intrinsic attribute of the university itself.

It has also been noted that a highly ranked university may have some cachet value in the context of a student moving from study to the first professional appointment – however, it is more likely that the cachet value is derived from the fact that highly ranked universities attract high achieving students who generally make for good graduate recruitment – rather than simply the fact that a university performs well on an international index. Nevertheless, the issue of examining universities from the perspective of how their cachet value translates into something potentially tangible is something that many students will embrace.

The various university ranking schemes should not be confused with the simplistic notion of prestige or status – these latter entities are largely dependent upon past history rather than current performance. Does it really matter to a current student whether Galileo himself studied and taught at a particular university if the current practice is poor? Again, the issue of prestige and status may translate into something tangible to the extent that they are responsible for attracting high achievers who go on to make history of the future.

And that leads us to conclude this chapter on the point raised at the beginning – universities are only meaningful in the context of

those who study and work there at a particular point in time. Although universities make much of the past, students should try to look beyond this and see how a university will address their future, through an alignment with individual life goals; through a genuine commitment to what is being offered, and through an environment which builds upon the aspirations of the individual concerned.

Chapter 5 Summary:

- (i) *There are three basic elements to selecting a university – these are:*
 - (I) *An alignment between the lifelong goals of the individual and the type of institution.*
 - (II) *The commitment of the institution to the particular program of study.*
 - (III) *The ranking or standing of the institution.*
- (ii) *It is important to consider scholastic achievement in the context of the complete individual, and ensure that a selected university fits comfortably with the complete individual – not just the scholastic record.*
- (iii) *Students need to determine how much commitment universities have to particular programs of study before selecting a university. This commitment is manifested in resources (academic, support and infrastructure) as well as linkages with industry and other bodies, and recognition (accreditation).*
- (iv) *There are numerous university ranking schemes. In order to use these, students need to be aware of the parameters that are used to determine rankings*
- (v) *Status and prestige are generally the result of historical track records. Students should ensure that any historical track records will translate into future university performance and relevance before making a final decision.*