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When Learning Goes Wrong

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

- What mechanisms are available to students when university learning goes wrong?
- What should students do when they realise they have selected the wrong course of study or the wrong university?

One of the intrinsic unfairnesses of the university system is that students generally need to decide upon a life's vocation at the age of 16 or 17 before selecting a university or course. Often, this means that people have to decide upon careers and professions well before they even understand what they entail, and usually long before they have any practical basis for a genuine passion or commitment for them. Some universities operate generalist undergraduate programs with the ability to vary content, but the reality is that, beyond the window dressing of the marketed "flexibility", students still need to enter the university portals with a reasonably clear picture of their long term goals in order to get a meaningful outcome from their study. And, although many students develop a passion for a particular vocation at an early age and can make well founded decisions, others simply take courses on the "*seemed like a good idea at the time*" principle without realising the consequences of their actions.

Generally, it is only during the course of university studies that a percentage of students realise that they have gotten things terribly wrong and need to take corrective action. Other students genuinely feel that they have made the correct decision but are simply unable to cope with university study. To a large extent, the problems that arise in this context speak of the need for something far greater than simply stumbling through a course by passing subjects, and specifically of a point in life that requires, from students, something tangibly different to what has been called for in secondary school – particularly, in attributes of self-awareness,

courage, commitment, maturity and accepting responsibility for one's own decisions. In the words of Helen Hayes,

“...Every human being on this earth is born with a tragedy, and it isn't original sin. He's born with the tragedy that he has to grow up. That he has to leave the nest, the security and go out to do battle. He has to lose everything that is lovely and fight for a new loveliness of his own making, and it's a tragedy. A lot of people don't have the courage to do it...”

The problems typically encountered by students when learning goes wrong are indeed a call to grow up, and to make good previous decisions, or perhaps to reflect upon one's own attributes and have the courage make changes to move forward in a different way. What really makes solving these problems difficult is that it requires students to change childhood mindsets which have served well in adolescence, and within the security of the nest, and to face the realities and battles of adulthood. Many problems require students to draw the fabled line in the sand and simply recognise that a problem actually exists and needs to be addressed.

There are of course numerous reasons that cause students to reconsider their life at university. These include:

- (i) Inadequate commitment to a chosen course leading to poor academic outcomes.
- (ii) A growing realisation that the chosen career and course of study are completely misaligned with life objectives.
- (iii) A desire just to drop out with no other personal objectives in mind – a feeling that university study is not the way of the future but with no clear conception of what the alternative pathway could be.

- (iv) Poor academic outcomes resulting despite genuine effort and intense commitment.
- (v) Growing external distractions (recreation, sports, social life, etc.) leading to diminished interest in a course of study and, consequently, poor academic outcomes.

The bad news is that all of these are serious problems and none have “easy” solutions. The good news is that, firstly, there are solutions to all the problems, and that life does go on despite them - in many cases it gets better as a result of the problems having occurred as one of life’s punctuation marks. Secondly, these problems are neither uncommon nor unique to an individual, so those students who do experience them should neither feel alone nor embarrassed nor isolated as a result of having them. In essence, all the problems are a junction point in life, and one at which important battles need to be fought – ironically with one’s self more often than with the university.

Problems (i), (ii) and (iii) all have a similar basis in the sense that they relate to students maturing and changing, and realising that a particular course or life choice may not lead to fulfilment or strong commitment. Many secondary school students (and sometimes even primary school students) are convinced early in life about their passion and vocation – typically these passions are for professions which are well understood in the community – for example, medicine, nursing, veterinary science, teaching, and so on. Commitment to these areas, even early in life, can be well founded because people have a reasonable understanding of what such professions entail.

But what about careers in areas that are not well understood in the broad community? Engineering, actuarial studies, economics, biochemistry, etc. – these are but a few of many, many professions in society which have little or no media exposure and, yet, there will inevitably be people in society who are well suited to them and who will develop a commitment to them, and may gain a life's fulfilment from them. The problem is, how is a 16 or 17 year old supposed to make such a decision based on research into the scant information that floats around society, and what happens when an incorrect decision is made?

As a starting point, all students entering university study need to understand that a university degree is not a prison sentence – it does not compel graduates to channel the rest of their lives into a particular environment or role. The fact that someone graduates in science does not mean that they cannot subsequently pursue a career in business or law or medicine or marketing or economics. While for the majority, a degree forms the basis of a long term career in a particular field, there is a significant number of people for whom the degree is just a starting point for life's career journey. Many people will undertake postgraduate degrees in a different field to shift their career – for example, a medical doctor may undertake a postgraduate qualification in business administration and pursue a career in management, perhaps in companies with a medical or biomedical theme. Some people will change fields altogether and take a second Bachelor's degree, for example, moving from a Bachelor's degree in, say, science, to take an additional degree in medicine or perhaps veterinary science.

The traditional notion of a university providing a single degree for individuals to use for a single career for the rest of their lives has, for some decades, given way to the notion of the degree being a starting point for a professional journey – one that may have many branches, diversions, back-tracks and repetitions.

In essence, whatever degree is chosen as a course of undergraduate study, provided that the university is doing its job in terms of learning, then the time spent during that degree is not wasted, regardless of the career changes that take place over the course of a lifetime. University learning isn't simply about vocational training – it is about maturing as a person and as a thinker. An engineering degree program is not simply about training people to become engineers, and a medical degree program is not simply about training people to become doctors. All good university degree programs are about students developing the ability to learn for themselves; to develop professional patterns of thinking and behaviour, and so on – paramount amongst these are the need to develop self-discipline, rigour and integrity. The vocational elements of the degree program are only tools that need to be mastered in order to be admitted to a particular profession – it is the capacity for ongoing self learning and maturation of thought that ultimately differentiates the professional from the lay-person.

In the final analysis, it is very rare to find individuals who, having completed an entire undergraduate program, whether as a result of a seemingly “good” or “bad” decision, would wish to turn back the clock and relive their lives differently. In fact, a hallmark of increasing maturity is the wisdom of understanding that in life there are really no “good” or “bad” decisions, and that how decisions and

choices are viewed in retrospect is a function of the integrity, perseverance and commitment with which their consequences are dealt by the individual.

With this background in mind, let us now look at possible ways forward for each of the problems highlighted earlier in this chapter.

Firstly, we look at the issue of inadequate commitment to a chosen course leading to poor academic outcomes. This is a serious problem that arises regularly in the university sector. Often, students have chosen a course without being prepared to genuinely commit to the level of study required to pass. They would like a degree if it comes easily but not if it requires an exhaustive work program. It isn't that these students can't pass – it is simply a question of not following through with one of life's earlier decisions. The real underlying problem with this situation is ultimately not whether students pass or fail but the fact that they are living with a problem that needs to be addressed and is, instead, often brushed aside with rationalisation:

“...I don't really care whether I pass this year or not – I'll see what happens and then if I fail I might do something else...”

This commonly applied rationalisation is self evidently (to all but those who make the claim) irrational because it suggests that an intelligent person would waste their time in the university system for months on end with no wish to have a positive outcome. In essence, it is a way of avoiding short-term responsibility for one's own actions, and the consequences of this can be serious, not just from an academic perspective but also from a life perspective.

Any student who becomes aware of a lack of commitment has to be mature enough to recognise that the problem will not go away unless they make some fundamental change to what they are doing. And, the longer a student takes to make that fundamental change the more difficult that change will be. So, with this in mind, what are the possible ways to resolve such a problem?

- The *status quo* is not an option, despite the fact that it may provide an easy short-term path that avoids accepting responsibility. When a student recognises that they simply don't have the commitment to continue then they must stop and institute change – this step, drawing a line in the sand, is generally the most difficult part of remedying a poor situation.
- The next step in the process is clearly instituting some form of change. This involves developing some maturity – recognising that it is easy to make decisions about life's directions but much more difficult to have the responsibility and professionalism to see those decisions through. So, one potentially valuable solution is not to change university programs or to drop out but, rather, to change one's outlook and understand that being at university also means being an adult with responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is making good a bad decision and seeing a decision through to the end. Students who struggle with commitment but ultimately use one of life's punctuation marks as a means of changing their outlook (rather than their direction) can gain enormous satisfaction at the end of

their university journey – for they have not just completed a degree, they have greatly matured as individuals.

- On recognising a lack of commitment, students can also seek to change courses or career paths. This is a common approach to tackling a lack of commitment. Again, this requires some maturity because it means accepting responsibility for a bad decision and making it good by a formal change that may require even more work or study. Again, it requires students to be proactive, rather than taking the seemingly easy path of allowing events to run their natural course. It also requires that students formally meet with their undergraduate course convenor to discuss possible options for transfer to other courses or universities. Moreover, it requires that students stop what they are currently doing and actively research other courses, study requirements, prerequisites, entry standards and so on. This is not a trivial task. The idea of changing courses or career paths also carries with it a significant element of risk – is the student tackling the actual problem or a symptom of the problem? Has the lack of commitment to the current course arisen because of a lack of maturity to see things through to the end? It is an easy task to convince oneself that all will be well if only the course of study is changed (“...then I’m sure I will have the commitment...”). The reality is that once students give up (too soon) on one program then many

will give up on another, and another. The moral here is for students not to change programs until they have tackled their own personal issues and shortcomings.

- Another option for changing the level of commitment to a program can be changing universities. It may well be that students simply find themselves incompatible with the emphasis and ethos of a particular university and will thrive better in another environment. In particular, some universities are more theoretical and others more applied in their learning approaches – a change from one to another may lead to better congruity between a student’s learning objectives and belief system and the university environment. Again, before such a step is taken it is critical that students evaluate themselves before they evaluate the university and the other options. Again, the moral is to tackle the fundamental problem not the symptoms.

The second problem which commonly arises amongst students is a realisation that a particular course of study is completely misaligned with their life objectives. Even though such students make a sound decision at the time they choose their course, and even though they make a genuine commitment to it, and perform well, they have come to realise that the course is not for them. This sort of situation arises frequently in disciplines that require specific human traits in addition to scholastic traits – typically, medicine, law, veterinary science, psychology, social work, and so on. In many cases, one simply cannot complete such degrees, regardless of commitment, unless one has a range of human attributes that make

one well suited to the particular profession. This can be a traumatic discovery for students because they come to a realisation that they cannot continue with something for which they have devoted a full measure of their thoughts and lives for some years.

Again, in these instances, the university environment is throwing up a challenge that speaks of maturity and responsibility. The maturity to understand that in life there are numerous points at which fundamental decisions have to be made – and that whether seemingly good or seemingly bad, all decisions have consequences. A mature person needs to deal with those consequences and move forward – that is a responsibility which is accorded to all adults in exchange for increasing freedom and autonomy. Recognising this, there are two possible solution scenarios here:

- If it is possible for a student to complete the chosen course of study, despite it being in conflict with changing perceptions of life directions, then there is considerable merit in doing so. It is a sign of self-discipline, maturity and responsibility that an individual makes good a seemingly bad decision. Students need to understand that there is no real “life” penalty for completing a degree program and then subsequently moving on to a different program of study later in life, particularly when the completion of the first degree has led to students developing self-discipline and responsibility – these traits are perhaps more important than the tools within the course itself.
- Where it is simply not possible for a student to continue with a particular course of study (e.g., medical students

who realise that they simply can't emotionally cope with anatomy or death), there are often options available which can minimise the trauma of change. Key among these are examining careers related to the initially chosen field of study – for example, moving from medicine to biomedical instrumentation or pathology enables a person to remain in the medical sector despite simply not having the personal attributes required to complete an originally chosen degree in medicine. Again, this sort of change requires drawing a line in the sand on the current program; recognising that it is not possible to continue, and then undertaking research into compatible alternatives.

The third problem which commonly arises in universities is when students simply decide that they want to drop out because they just don't like university study. Perhaps they are passing and just scraping through, but don't have the enthusiasm to do really well. Such students often don't know what they want as an alternative – they just feel bored and frustrated, and don't want to be continuing with study. In such cases there are numerous rationalisations that are applied:

“...if I just drop out and take a year off to find myself, then I'm sure that I'll be able to decide on something different in the future and I'll be really committed...”

“...the course I'm doing is really boring. Maybe I'll just drop out for a while then do something different later...”

If only life were so simple that such tempting rationalisations bore fruit – that, by shifting from minimal effort to zero effort, one could actually achieve contentment, commitment and fulfilment. And yet, this is a commonly occurring theme amongst students who choose to drop out of various study programs with no alternatives in mind – the allure of contentment through lack of effort. Unfortunately, the problem (irony) with this line of thought is that those who do achieve contentment and fulfilment through their work and lives do so because of perseverance, effort, commitment, integrity (“...to thine own self be true...”). It is also unfortunately the case that those who move towards such a negative thought process, based upon giving up their university learning, often do so because they have achieved their current level of performance with minimal work; few challenges and impediments.

When students say that they are bored with a university course, in effect what they are saying is that they have not yet developed the maturity to be at university. A university undergraduate program is largely whatever students wish to make of it, and although there is a structured program that underpins it, there is a need for students (hopefully inspired by the academic staff) to build their own program around the structure – a program which is exciting to them as individuals. Universities don’t prevent students from getting books from the library or searching the Internet for materials that build upon the established courses. These are all options available to students to make courses interesting. When students aren’t finding courses interesting it is because they are not doing the hard work that is required for self-motivation.

So, the first point that needs to be addressed when students consider dropping out, with no alternative in mind, is how did I get to this point in the first place? Have I done all that I can to prevent myself from getting to this stage? Have I done something wrong?

In many cases, what students have done wrong is to come to university with the adolescent mindset that the adult world is little more than an amusement park that should offer them entertainment, excitement and fulfilment – and, when the adult world doesn't live up to such expectations, then it should provide the wronged child with compensation or redress. The world, however, has the unfortunate trait of bestowing upon adults the burden of responsibility as a counterbalance to the rights which it accords. One of those responsibilities is that adults have to do battle to shape themselves and their environment into a form that provides entertainment and fulfilment – adult students can't simply go back to their parents or lecturers and say “...*I'm bored, find me something more interesting to do...*”, for this is one of the responsibilities they themselves have inherited as adults.

Of course, in practice, students do tend to blame the university and the lecturers for not creating the level of motivation required. Even when this criticism is well founded (and it often is), it is generally only a symptom of a larger problem. Consider the fact that many (perhaps most) students go through university with poor and uninspiring lecturers; poorly structured programs, and so on, and yet they still thrive – largely, these students are able to self-motivate, while the remainder do not. Worse still, the unmotivated ones can delude themselves with the notion that, by having even less motivation, they will perform better.

The moral here is that dropping out without a meaningful plan tends to demonstrate a complete lack of self motivation. So, if a student is thinking of dropping out, then they should first give themselves a test of their own maturity:

- Conduct an audit on one's previous personal performance in achieving life goals – how many times has one planned for study and other outcomes without having achieved the required end goals?
- Develop a detailed plan for how the “drop out” period will be spent in reorganising one's life, study and career. This should include how time will be spent pursuing other alternatives – perhaps technical studies or apprenticeships; whether work experience will be pursued (and if so how); how many months will be spent pursuing various activities and how these activities will be funded.

The reality is that many students who simply choose to drop out of university study do not want to face the challenge of such a personal test of one's own maturity – “...I need some time and space to myself...”; “...I just need a break, I'll think about all of those things later...”. But - if a student isn't prepared to subject themselves to such a test, then what are they really saying about their approach to life and their career? Perhaps that they are simply seeking an easy escape from the battles of adulthood. Trying the following mantra as an alternative might have some effect – “...I am an adult; I made a decision as an adult, and I am mature enough to make good on that decision, regardless of the effort that is required...”

But what of those students who fall into the fourth problem group – where there is genuine commitment and effort, and despite this, the academic outcomes are either poor or catastrophic in the sense that they are leading to total failure?

When a student is making a genuine commitment, and yet this is not reflected in academic outcomes then there are really only two possible causes – the first being that the student has the capacity to do well but has been let down by the structure and learning program of the university; the second being that, despite the best of intentions, the student does not have the capacity to complete the program.

Determining where the cause of poor academic performance lies is not a difficult task from a student's perspective. The obvious litmus test is to benchmark against one's own peers. Clearly, if the bulk of one's peers are doing well then, regardless of how the university is delivering its programs, the cause is at the level of the individual student. On the other hand, if the bulk of students are performing poorly in subjects, then there is good reason to believe that the university needs to be formally challenged on how it delivers its programs.

It is the exception, rather than the rule, that university programs have the bulk of enrolled students performing poorly. So, if it is indeed the case that the problem lies with the individual, then what can be done to remedy the problem of poor performance? As a starting point, individual students need to understand that, by accepting people into a program, based upon a scholastic record (high school results, etc.), the university has entered into a *de facto* contract with the individual that implies that the individual has the intellectual capacity to achieve the required academic outcome,

provided that they put in the required effort. Of course, this is not an ironclad guarantee but rather a *bona fide* attempt at ensuring that people who get into a course of study can actually complete it.

So what can be going wrong when a student puts in the work but is not achieving the required outcomes?

- University learning makes an implicit assumption that an individual student will mature as they progress through a course. This maturation will include the development of more sophisticated thought processes, reasoning, logic, etc. This assumption, however, is not always valid – different humans mature and develop at different rates. So, in some instances, it is simply the case that the student isn't maturing as quickly as his/her peers, and is seeing the consequences manifested in scholastic achievement. This is an intrinsic human trait which can't be fixed with pills or a more concerted effort but will take time to resolve.
- Students have a penchant for different types of learning environments – for example, some students like to start with practical examples and have the theory follow later, while others prefer the theory and have difficulty with the practical implications. Some students prefer a top-down learning approach, commencing with a broad overview and then moving down towards detailed analysis while others prefer a bottom up approach, commencing with detail elements and working up to a broader perspective. If there is an ongoing mismatch between the learning approach provided by the

university, and that which is preferred by the student, then there is a case for looking at a different type of university – perhaps moving from an applied university to a theoretical one or vice-versa.

- In some cases, a particular course requires a particular mindset – for example, the hard sciences (physics, maths, engineering, etc.) require a detailed, analytical mindset which has little tolerance for the abstract and focuses, instead, on sequential, systematic learning. In the arts, there is a need for a mindset which can look at broader and more abstract issues that cannot be resolved by simple sequential logic and analysis. One either has a mindset predisposed to one of these courses or one doesn't – students who move from creative fields to hard sciences experience the same difficulties as students who move from hard sciences to creative fields – they simply cannot make the mindset transition that is required.

The most common concern that students have when they are not performing well is that they are simply not intellectually capable of handling the program, but it is far more often the case that the cause comes down to one of the above three causes – maturity, learning preference or mindset predisposition.

Obviously, one can't remedy the issue of maturity – the natural development of the human brain and mind – if a student isn't naturally maturing at the average rate that is expected (arbitrarily) by the university, the only solutions are either to accept that this is a problem and compensate by hard work; seek another

program of study, or take time (e.g., a year) off to mature by gaining practical work experience in a related area. The first and third options offer the greatest likelihood of achieving the life objective of completing the course. Increased effort, through hard work, however, is a big ask, particularly when one knows that the hard work is largely there to compensate rather than excel. The option of work experience is also another excellent alternative – perhaps deferring study after having secured a job in a relevant field. This has the combined advantages of increasing maturity; developing professional skills, and providing a basis for future employment when the degree program is completed.

If a student can determine that the cause of poor performance relates to the learning paradigm employed by the university, then one option is to seek a transfer to another university with a more compatible learning paradigm – this has potential advantages in the sense that it may enable a student to move from struggling through to excelling and enjoying his/her study time.

If students recognise that they simply do not have the mindset for a particular course – that is, they are intrinsically oriented towards creative pursuits or hard science based pursuits, and the course they are undertaking is in direct conflict with these, then there is clearly a case for considering a radical change in course. If one has genuinely made an effort to achieve good outcomes but is unable to do so because of a mindset incompatibility with the chosen course, then there comes a time when the student has to again draw the line in the sand, and say enough is enough. There is little merit in pursuing a course which is diametrically opposed to one's entire learning mindset, and little likelihood that one will ever excel in the

field after graduation. It is in this instance that the case for course change is well justified.

In the majority of cases, dealing with the above issues is not the first step in rectifying basic performance problems. Sometimes, the remedies are far simpler, and all that is required is additional support for a period of time. This can often be obtained from university tutors and demonstrators, academic staff, or even by hiring personal/professional tutors for a period of time. The amount of money that is invested in hiring professional tutors may be recouped many times over, if one considers the alternative of failing and repeating a subject or a year of a program.

By far the largest cause of poor performance in university stems from growing external distractions – part-time work; sports; recreation; social activities, and so on. Again, one needs to remember that most of these activities and freedoms are those accorded to adults, in exchange for responsibility and obligation. Many students need to undertake work during their undergraduate program for obvious, practical reasons of survival. But if such work ends up being deleterious to the study which it supports, then one has to question the entire structure that the student has set up in order to undertake a university degree program.

Sports, recreation and social activities are all privileges that are important to developing as an adult, but are all given to an adult on the assumption that such an adult will be able to moderate them to the extent where they are an enhancement to long-term life choices rather than a distraction from them. Students naturally gravitate towards these activities because of the increased level of independence that they acquire within the university environment.

When they affect academic performance, however, students have to recognise that these activities have a cost, and it is an adult's responsibility to trade off the costs against the benefits. At the very minimum, students should attempt to plan sports, recreation and social activities around a meaningful study program, so that they can recognise when the line has been crossed in terms of commitment to lifestyle as opposed to commitment to life goals.

In the final analysis, all of the things that go wrong with university learning come down to one key issue – the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the battle that students face in dealing with this significant challenge. There are those who face adulthood head on and accept the challenges and responsibilities, and those who revert back to adolescence and avoid the transition for as long as possible. Again, quoting from Helen Hayes, on the transition to adulthood,

“...a lot of people don't have the courage to do it...”

Chapter 8 Summary:

- (i) *University learning can go wrong for a number of reasons – many of these pertain to the transition from adolescent behaviour to adult behaviour and the maturation of students as human beings.*
- (ii) *The first step in resolving all the problems related to learning is to recognise that there is a problem – drawing a line in the sand on the problem, and reconciling oneself to the fact that a problem exists and needs to be remedied.*
- (iii) *It is important for students to understand whether learning problems exist because of external factors (e.g., the university) or because of intrinsic behaviour patterns and shortcomings within themselves – until one understands which of these have led to the problem then the issues are difficult to resolve.*
- (iv) *It is unusual for students to perform poorly in university programs simply because of a lack of intellectual capacity – typically the problem resides elsewhere and relates to issues of maturity; learning patterns, and the mindset that one has for particular fields of study.*
- (v) *All the problems that arise when learning goes wrong are difficult to resolve from a personal level and an emotional level. They require self-examination, resolve and an acceptance of responsibility.*
- (vi) *Students need to recognise that learning problems arise frequently in the university system, and that they are neither unique nor alone in facing them. They are a challenge to be faced, not an insurmountable obstacle to life and fulfilment.*