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**Todd’s story**

One of the key purposes of higher education is to develop students’ skills and knowledge so that they can be transferred to other aspects of their life, for example, employment. For Todd, the pivotal learning experience derived from his time at university, came not from the university itself but rather the opportunity that university provided him to participate in an overseas exchange. Todd’s recollections of his first year at university were feelings of isolation and disjunction, until the overseas exchange experience changed that.

**I felt like I was out of my depth and like I didn’t belong here. I’ve never really seen myself as a university student. I’ve always done really well academically but found the feel of university to be a bit pretentious. I didn’t like at it first, it just wasn’t really my thing. And so, unfortunately that had a bit of an impact on my attitude. I didn’t really engage with people that much, instead I just did my degree. It wasn’t until later years, that I tried to change that, and a lot of that had to do with going on an exchange overseas to Toronto, Canada. That was the best thing I’ve ever done in my life. It taught me a lot, including about taking risks and meeting people.**

Although Todd recognises the benefits that university has provided including increasing confidence, and an ability to critically analyse and develop deeper understandings of social issues, University hasn’t quite met his expectations. In particular, Todd reports his disappointment surrounding the lack of career opportunities associated with having a university qualification, although he acknowledges that this may be a common perception amongst his generation of students.

**The impression I get from a lot of us is that we are a bit precious in this day and age. I think we have these great expectations and we’ve been built up to thinking it’s going to be this wonderful thing, and it’s a bit deflating when you find out perhaps this is not as idealistic as it’s going to be, you’re not going to get this massive job. And I think society, not that it’s society’s fault, it’s just I think we’re a bit soft and we just get beaten down really easily when we think things aren’t going to be excellent ….. It’s like the popping of the bubble which you expected to keep inflating.**

For Todd being a university student is no more important than any other aspect of his life, he acknowledges that all of his other roles, for example, being a marathon runner, the eldest son in his family, a sales assistant are no less important in his identity construction.

**To say ‘student’, for me, I don’t know, I find it a bit pretentious. I just find ‘a student’ gives these impressions of this ‘lah di da life’ and it's all very easy and that kind of stuff. And I don’t really like having that perception because I think it takes away from the effort you do put into things.**

He does not feel that his experience of university life has matched that of the imagined or 'advertised' life of a uni student often depicted in the popular press. Todd feels that this portrayal may be the reality for some students who are perhaps more engaged in university life but for him it does not feel like a realistic representation of his experience.

**I just feel like when I see someone and their title is ‘student’, it makes you think of the uni ads where it's all just lying around on the lawns and then “Oh I’ll roll over and write my essay now”. But I don’t know why, I just wasn’t really comfortable with it. So essentially I don’t really define, or describe myself as a student any more than I would anything else I suppose. University doesn’t take precedence in my identity.**

When asked what instigated him to continue with further studies, Todd indicated that there was always an implicit understanding within his family that he would continue into higher education. An assumption strengthened through his private schooling, which Todd perceived to promote the notion that it was “university or it was nothing”. Todd’s awareness and gratitude towards his parents for working hard to be able to afford a private education, coupled with his own desire as the eldest child to be a pioneer in the family further contributed towards his motivation to continue on to university.

**I had always planned to come to uni. I guess as a first child you see yourself, in the image of being a bit of pioneer in the family and you want to be the one who goes into new areas. And I was always academically more skilled than I would be in any trade or anything else, and so uni was always going to happen.**

As for his degree choice, Todd elected to complete a journalism degree based on his enjoyment of writing and the perceived prestige attached to the qualification. Todd knew that at 17 he did not really have any idea of what he really wanted to do as a career but he had worked really hard in school to get a high TER score and therefore laughingly acknowledges that his choice of degree was probably related more to the fact that he could get into the course rather than it being the best course for him.

**I had a lot of trouble deciding whether to do journalism or information technology which is what I’d done really well in year 12, and there’s a lot more demand for those jobs… but it was a low TER, and I didn’t have to work hard to get there, so it was really just a bit of an ego thing. I got a high TER and it felt that there was more prestige attached to the journalism degree and that made the grandparents happy.**

Todd decided to complete his journalism degree despite his misgivings, however he still wonders about his decision, recalling that he momentarily considered transferring into information technology at the end of his first year at university. It was the thought of his accumulating HECS debt that prevented him from changing degrees, concluding that his HECS debt and his time were already lost and therefore he would be better off to stick with his original choice. Having now nearly completed his honours year in International Relations, Todd declares that he is feeling more confident in his skills and future employability.

In regards to finances, Todd works part time and lives at home however he has decided to defer his university fees as he would prefer to put money towards a house as a future investment as opposed to paying his fees up front. Although Todd feels that he has not been impacted by the financial costs of university any more than other students, he has felt the pressure and stress of studying due to being a high achiever. The personal impact on Todd has been the sacrifice of his time and sleep, but he ensures that he continues to regularly see friends and participate in sport.

Throughout Todd’s story there is evidence of his admiration and respect for his parents, their hard work and support throughout his life. He often talks with his mother about his university experiences. As for the future, Todd is looking forward to establishing the next phase of his life of moving out of home and living independently, but has no firm convictions as to where his professional career may lead him.