

Is the Arts degree history?

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AS the number of university students swells, the Arts degree is losing its most important battle: to prove itself relevant.

In the immediate aftermath of 12 years at school, the question constantly asked is, "So what are you doing this year?" My reply is that I am doing Arts/Law at UQ. Those who reply solely with "Arts", almost invariably sound resigned, even apologetic, as they utter the name. Some even feel the need to say "just Arts".

No one would say "just Law" or "just Engineering". Even Science students, undertaking a degree just as broad as Arts, never downgrade their degree.

Yet even the Law half of my studies doesn't save me from disapproval. A former boss look baffled when she asked me, "Why, if you got into Law, would you bother with Arts?" My answer was that I thought the subjects would be interesting.

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But with rising university fees, more and more people think that "interesting" just isn't enough. These days it seems everyone is panicked by the thought, "Where is this getting me?"

With Gough Whitlam's free university long gone, uni in 2007 is not about becoming educated but becoming "equipped for the workforce".

A BA is seen as an indulgence for those "kidding themselves" that liberal arts could possibly be useful. And the more voices trumpeting this, the more likely it is that employers will dismiss a BA as a bogus credential.

The catch-22 is a vicious one.

So how did Arts get stuck with such an appalling reputation?

Clearly, cut-offs for university entrance have nothing to do with it.

Engineering, which has retained its image of being challenging and rewarding, is only a few OP points above Arts at most universities.

One of the big reasons for Arts' declining reputation is its image as a procrastination degree.

It's true that many students take a year of Arts while unsure of what they want from uni in the future.

But this has value. While possibly earning transferable credit for a different degree, students can sample a huge variety of different subjects.

Yet the very variety that makes Arts so strong as a generalist degree also undermines its image. There is a notion that because Arts is so broad, so general, so all encompassing, that really it means nothing at all. If you were to study Economics, Spanish, Science or Fine Arts singularly you would be seen as focused. But attempt any kind of mix of these subjects, even with a major in one specific area, and you suddenly become a dilettante.

In this decade, the emphasis of the modern workforce is on us being chameleons, constantly adapting to different environments, learning new skills. How unfair is it then, that a degree which has a broad selection of subjects should be castigated as leaving students ill-equipped for the job market.

Finally, there is the view that Arts subjects are content "lite" and have simply been airbrushed with the most trendy ideologies.

Yes, there are certain tutors and lecturers who pedantically defend the latest buzzwords as "essential" concepts. But Arts is hardly a content-free zone when I am required to have read eight novels for a coming literature exam.

So how are our universities engaging in the BA's battle for relevancy?

One is planning to surrender. This year, the Queensland University of Technology proposed a gradual scrapping of all Arts and Social Science degrees.

Vice-Chancellor Peter Coaldrake said that it was necessary to concentrate on thriving applied degrees such as IT and Media. Academics have denounced the phase-out, questioning the standards of a university without history, politics or geography students.

At the other end of the spectrum, the University of Melbourne has improved the popularity of Arts by making it one of six New Generation degrees available in 2008.

Under the Melbourne model, the number of undergraduate courses available will be cut from 96 to 28 and certain key degrees such as Law will be made postgraduate. In the wake of these announcements, the university reported a 35 per cent increase in the number of students making Arts their first preference.

But the fact remains that a liberal arts education will never be a cookie cutter degree, slotting graduates into prescribed jobs, in the same way that a Law degree produces a lawyer or a Dentistry degree a dentist. It is this generality that dooms Arts in the minds of many.

Fortunately, others recognise that our society needs degrees that encourage a variety of thinking skills.

A few years ago, a former captain of my school addressed our speech night on the value of thinking skills, rather than the acquisition of facts. He had graduated as a mining engineer and worked for several years in the industry before being offered a postgraduate scholarship to Oxford. There, he studied philosophy.

Upon his return to Australia, to become CEO of a high-profile mining company, he discovered that the thinking skills he had acquired in his philosophy studies were highly relevant to his new role. Technical information, he explained, is quickly out of date. Thinking skills never are.

Maybe that airy-fairy Arts degree isn't so irrelevant after all.

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