I got a 99 but I had a lousy education

By Alana Leabeater

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People think my 99-plus ATAR qualifies me to be a bona fide genius, but I assure them that the longer they get to know me, the more they'll realise this: in the HSC, I just played the system. I don't think I'm necessarily any smarter than anyone else; I just did exactly what the markers wanted. This approach works for me at university, too. I'm about to graduate with a science degree that I don't feel I deserve, because I can recall barely any of the content I've studied in the past four years.

As students at high school, we were taught to the exam; as students at university, we carry that habit over, so that even if we are interested in the subjects (and for the most part, I was), in the back of our minds we are always thinking, "Will this be in the final exam?" Unsurprisingly, I fare much worse in practical assessments at university than my grade point average would suggest. During the two internships I have undertaken, I have struggled to retain and apply new skills, as well as accept critical feedback. I'm an employer's second choice: good on paper but doesn't deliver.

It shouldn't come as a complete surprise that young Australians aren't happy with their high school education. Who could be content with a system that hallows perfectionism, trains students to memorise and regurgitate content in rigid exam formats, and allows such little room for creativity? The more the years pass since I graduated from high school, the more I have come to see the flaws in the system I once revered.

A recent UNICEF Australia survey found most students aged 14 to 16 wanted to learn more "practical skills" at school. I join them in this desire. I dropped mathematics before the HSC because I couldn't see myself ever using polynomial division in my day-to-day life; the extent of my education in sex and relationships through PDHPE (personal development, health and physical education) was the old "banana on a condom" lesson; and never did I learn things at school that I would consider truly important for being an adult: how to do a tax return, change a tyre, pay off a car, buy a house, nail a job interview, do CPR, start a self-managed super fund.

Education in Australia not only needs to be more practical, it needs to be more holistic. Valuing high marks and exam success over practical skills – and skills in entrepreneurship, leadership and innovation – is an antiquated model that turns out unenthusiastic, uncreative, outcome-focused students who lack the necessary qualities to be well-rounded members of the workforce, and of society.

I'm trying to improve myself outside of university by travelling extensively, learning a language, volunteering and playing competitive sport. I only wish that these were things that could form part of my education, so that maybe at graduation, the piece of paper with my name and degree on it would mean more to me than years of student debt.

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