

The recent discussions in the columns and Letters to the Editor of *The Canberra Times* make clear that the use-by date of the Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) as the instrument of entry to universities is fast approaching.

What is much less clear, however, is the kind of indicator or indicators that will replace it. For the TER has one inestimable advantage to poorly funded universities: it is cheap to operate.

When I started as an undergraduate in the early 1950s the business of entrance to university was utterly different. A minimum level of attainment on exit from high school was all that was required: possession of a Leaving Certificate, with a pass in English and at least four other subjects.

At our school (an academically inclined state high school in Armidale NSW) we Fifth Year students all did six subjects, save for the one or two who were attempting three honours level examinations; they abandoned their weakest subject and hoped that good honours results would bring their score up.

The point of all of this activity was not to get into university so much as to win one of the few scholarships available. In those days there was no Austudy benefit (not that it is much of a benefit any more), and no opportunity to combine part-time work and part-time study. Our part-time students were all of mature age, and during the day they worked as school teachers, librarians and public servants of various kinds. They came to university in the evening.

University entrance did not require honours — just a bare pass. What stopped you going was the lack of a scholarship or financial support from parents. If you had access to money, then you could enrol in anything, provided that you had the minimum qualification. I cannot recall competition for places.

I mention this history because there is a tendency to look back to a past golden age when universities were highly selective. The TER, it is sometimes claimed, is there to separate the sheep from the goats — to sort out those who really should be at university from the try-hards and no-hopers. It wasn't necessary in the old days because only the best went to university.

Like so much golden age reminiscing this account of things is wrong. Universities have only been highly selective in recent years, and mostly because the professions have transferred the work and costs of professional preparation to the universities, which has helped to expand the whole higher education sector, increase its cost to the taxpayer, and reduce the willingness of governments to find the money.

Forty years ago the professions were crying out for new practitioners, as Australia was going through one of its regular shortages of skilled people. As a result, some people were admitted into university with bare passes and came out the other end as doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers and teachers.

Many of them were good ones, too, and almost certainly you will have encountered one or two of them, men (mostly) of experience, wisdom and status in society. Moreover, some of their schoolmates who had done well at school did not do nearly so well at university. And some of those who had done quite badly at school found themselves at university and went on to great things.

I doubt that much has changed other than the availability of public funding. Even in this year of declining total applications for university the outcome in March will be that some qualified seekers after knowledge will have failed to get a place. Why? Because their TER was lower than someone else's, or lower than the minimum the university in question had set.

Their exclusion from university study does not mean that they would have failed. In fact, some of them would have done very well, especially if their motivation was high. Not only that, long before the end of the first semester, every university in Australia will see the departure from classes of young men and women who have found out in a few short weeks that university is not for them, at least now. All had TERs which were high enough to gain admission.

Some of them will have enrolled in the wrong subjects. Some of them need a break from formal study (I recommend a break of at least a year for every school leaver). Some of them were over-schooled in their secondary education, and cannot survive in the rather anonymous, anarchic world of university education where no-one will drive you if you do not drive yourself. Some miss their friends, some miss home, some find the modern university, especially the very big ones, hopelessly alienating.

Could we have anticipated such outcomes? Yes, but not by using the TER. That only tells us how well they did at school. But university is not school (and life is not university — some high performers at university do badly outside it).

We could have learned a lot had we interviewed every applicant. But that is hardly practical. Both UC and ANU take in students from every State and Territory, and applicants from far away cannot attend for an interview. Intending students are allowed to express six preferences in their search for a university which will have them; they cannot be interviewed by them all.

So what is to be done? One thing is obvious enough. Universities should retain some flexibility around all their entry levels, and take the chance of admitting students who just missed out but whose background, personality and support suggest that they should do at least as well as the average student in that cohort. That means paying real attention to a small minority of students. We are doing that now.

The bold step will be to look for a different system, one which takes for granted that some kind of success at school as a minimum, but looks in particular for evidence of real motivation, some sense of what is involved in university work (persistence), character, extra-curricular interests, personal autonomy, and so on.

A portfolio of that kind offered by the applicant to the university would be the basis of selection. Yes, it would be more time-consuming for the student and more expensive for the university. But it is hard to believe that we would not make better decisions about entrance to university, and that would be blessing to universities, students and the community which supports both.

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