

## THE EDUCATION CRISIS

Francesca Sidoti

We need a revolution. I wish I said this as a revolutionary. My whole life I've attempted to look natural with a bandanna around my neck, a cigarillo in my mouth and Nietzsche in my bag. I try, but I suspect I don't look very convincing. But start me thinking about the current education system in this dear state of ours, and all I want to do is reach for the Communist Manifesto and pull on the camouflage. An education revolution is needed, because what we have isn't working. Worse than being ineffective, it's hindering the people we set out to assist and encourage.

I can't speak for what's happening in other states. NSW born and bred, a graduate of The Year of Hard Slog commonly known as the HSC, I tend to have a pretty dark view of education in our state. I'm sure people who have gone through the VCE or other equivalents have as negative a perception of the process. But I can only talk about what I know, and I know that what we are asking young people to go through in NSW isn't right. I'm not sure what the alternative should look like, but I know it needs to include a greater acceptance and encouragement of alternatives such as vocational education, and much less emphasis on the process as the make or break moment of a lifetime. School needs to be reconfigured around providing options, not barring them.

Thankfully, the mood appears to have shifted. Finally it would appear the university executives are in agreement that the HSC doesn't turn out well-rounded healthy people who have a good grasp of education. University of Sydney Vice Chancellor Michael Spence recently stated the HSC was "a crude and one-dimensional measure of a student's track record". Hear hear says!! He continued, "What we are looking for is [sic] people who are going to grow into champions in the kind of high-quality environment we can provide for them. That is not necessarily the person who ran the fastest race". As someone who is a particularly slow runner, I sincerely appreciate the sentiment.

Michael Spence is not alone in his feeling. The Macquarie University Vice Chancellor has long been a campaigner to abolish the UAI, and the new chief executive of Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (where do they come up with these catching titles?) has voiced concern about having the HSC as a national model of assessment. I'm not surprised. Anyone that went through the HSC would have significant concerns about exporting it across the country.

Personally, I had managed to forget what a horrible process the HSC was until my younger brothers started it this year. Normal amiable people both, they've become unrecognisable. We're asking too much of young people. We're putting them under too much pressure. Without taking away from those who work hard in the HSC, a lot of what the final exams test is how well you can remember your English essays. Call me crazy, but that's not what I have in mind when I talk about education.

There are lots of arguments espoused for the HSC. You need a ranking system. Final exams are important. How else do you organise people into university? There are safeguards if things go wrong, such as special considerations in the case of disadvantage. But by and large, the delightfully apocalyptic rhetoric surrounding the HSC aims to suggest that your life hangs in the balance of the little numbers of your UAI (or an ATAR, I think that's they are calling it these days. Back in the day, it was a UAI. An ATAR sounds way too much like the online version of yourself in Second Life). I find it hard to believe that a system of educating young people must inevitably be a horrible process.

The suggestion from the Board of Studies and the Universities Admissions Centre is that alternatives are encouraged in the HSC. I disagree. Vocational education plays a minimal and little-recognised role in giving kids certificate level qualifications and industry experience, all within a school environment. And yet the implication is that the kids who do vocational education are in some way less talented than those who do the academic subjects. Instead of supporting people to obtain apprenticeships when they leave school, TAFE and careers in trade don't rate a mention. You play the game, or you don't play at all.

If we legally require young people to be students until they are seventeen years old, we have an obligation to provide the education that works best for them until that age. It's a contract. If we demand that that they are there, we must also provide something that will engage them.

Concerns with the HSC go beyond engagement, and extend into the mental health of young people. A 2003 report from the Commission for Children and Young People estimated that one in eleven youth suicides are due to the HSC. One in eleven. As soon as a school system starts figuring as a major reason for youth suicide, the school system needs to change. In fact, it should have changed long before anyone felt that such an act was his or her only solution.

What happened to our duty of care? Individually, the teachers involved are doing their best for the students. But the system of ranking students, the pressure to produce classes with high-ranking scores, seems to take away from the learning and support that is necessary. If I remember rightly, being a teenager isn't the easiest of times, and adding this pressure into the mix just seems insanity.

Sadly much of the pressure on students seems to come from the schools themselves, who seem unwilling to encourage vocational education within their curriculum and seem infinitely happier to pack people who want to do VET off to 'alternative schools'. Career counsellors often don't seem to feel the need to talk about any kind of option, outside of a university degree. The change needs to be multi-layered. It needs to come from government policy, supporting vocational education in all schools. It needs to come from the Board of Studies and universities in promoting alternatives. Change needs to come from schools, where alternatives such as VET are encouraged and the one-size-fits-all approach abolished.

It's time to take stock of our priorities. It's time to genuinely do what is right for our young people. Because until we do, young people will fall through the cracks. Education should be about providing equal opportunities for all. The only equality the HSC provides is an equality of stress levels. We



encourage young people to feel like failures if they're ATAR is low or if they prefer construction to English Extension. Until that mindset is banished from our education system, we will continue to fail young people. And so, comrades, I say it's time to don our berets, paint our placards, and take it down.

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