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*Nolstagia is sternly avoided in the world of academia. But it can't be helped, it creeps up on the best of us. So it was for me when I walked into the Main Quad recently after some years. Whilst I didn't exactly break down in tears of rapture - there was a wedding taking place anyway, so it would have been unseemly - I was inspired to reflect on what life was like as an Arts student at the Uni 20 years ago.*

## Arts Degree, Please Take One

Being a Uni student was a breeze in the 1980s. Tertiary education was *free* - even HECS was no more than a glint in some Canberra bean counter's eye. The suburbs around Sydney Uni were a student's paradise of cheap rents and cheap restaurants. The pubs crawled with live bands and the sun shone down on the campus for months on end.

I was ready to be impressed by everything around me, from the neo-gothic architecture to the bewildering array of societies and groups on offer at orientation day: from bushwalking to badminton, the medieval society to pure mathematics. Sydney's 1850s buildings - and more modern add-ons - may not have been Oxford, but they were the antipodean equivalent, transported direct from the Northern Hemisphere.

I wasn't just there to study; I was enrolled for the entire student experience. I expected a heady mix of *Brideshead Revisited* meets *May Week was in June*. Life would consist of all night parties, long sunny afternoons, sipping beer on the Manning verandah and the occasional essay returned with high distinctions and unstinting praise. Between lectures, I would lounge under the jacaranda tree and read my way through the student's real reading list.

Something got in the way. Was it the hesitance of youth itself? Or was it just that my inflated dreams meant that I was always going to be disappointed?

Days turned into months. Reality snuck up on me. My first tutorial presentation was a jumble of mumbled inanities and inaccuracies. In fact the only person who seemed to be able to articulate anything apart from the tutor was a mature age student. The tutor took pity on me and gave me a pass, but I sensed from the thin draw of his lips that I had confirmed his view that this crop of pimply adolescents were not going to set the world on fire.



Assignments and tutorials crowded in on each other, each with a reading list containing an entire floor of books in Fisher libraries “stack”. The question that always haunted me most at high school was there again: the dreaded “discuss,” e.g., *Was ancient Athens a democracy? Discuss*. Discuss what? Of course it was a democracy wasn’t it?

Now at University you had to go into even more detail: extended oligarchy or just straight oligarchy with some token elements of democracy? Marxist and non-Marxist viewpoints? Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The intention was to build to a grand finale, a conclusion that would rock the foundations of the academic world. What happened with me is that I would be finishing my conclusion when the tentacle of some vital key point would reach out of the deep and wind itself around my neck. In the days before PC’s, there wasn’t much to do except scrap the conclusion page and try again.

Then there were footnotes, the bane of every student’s life. Did Professor Jones say that? Or was it an original idea? Buggered if I know, I wrote it at three in the morning. I would ask myself in a frenzy, scrabbling around in the bottomless pile of notes on my desk at 3am in the morning. Was it page 20, or page 200? Should it be op cit, an ibid or passim? Was that a primary, secondary or tertiary source? Where’s the liquid paper? Where’s the coffee? Forget about the coffee, I need a drink!

The research facilities at University were excellent, but I still remember a hell on earth in Fisher Library called “Closed Reserve” (interesting name, I always thought, which I believe has now moved on).

Closed reserve held a range of difficult to obtain articles and books which undergraduates could borrow for two hours. It was constantly been swamped by grasping, desperate students after their lecturer declared they would only give high distinctions out to students who read *this article*. Why couldn’t they just run off 300 copies and hand them out and the lecture? I used to ask myself.

Another piercing source of reality was the lack of regard with which certain other students held the Arts faculty. The fact that my HSC results were average did not help when I sat down in lecture theatres and read the heartless jokes scribbled down by some ignorant engineer:



1. **Question** How many Arts students does it take to change a light bulb?  
**Answer:** not applicable. There is no recorded instance of any number of Arts students being capable of changing a light bulb
2. Above a sketch of a toilet paper dispenser: "Arts degree- please take one".
3. **Question:** What does BA stand for? **Answer:** Bugger all.

But the real let down came in the world of extra curricular activities. For some reason, my ambitions to become editor of *Honi Soit*, president of the SRC, an international rugby representative, a renowned chess player, the marvel of the debating world and the toast of every party in sight didn't come to fruition. I never actually joined these groups. I vaguely expected that people would appear out of the woodwork, instantly recognise my many talents and the rest would be history.

By the second year I was in a routine. By the third year, I was sick of the routine. The thing about University was that you had to fend for yourself. No one at the University cared whether you missed a lecture or not. This was called freedom; the state of being every high school student longs for. But there was another side of the coin: the potentially impersonal environment with a huge University with 20,000 people coming and going.

At lectures, we talked about the processes of being a student. "I'm late on the assignment again", "I got an extension because my pet goldfish died", or "the only way your going to get a high distinction from him is (knowing nod of the head)". Where were the fiery clash of ideals, the cut and thrust of political and social idealism?

But was my concept of the dynamic University environment a fiction? How much of my disappointment could be linked to a lack of personal initiative? In his autobiography, the author David Martin calls his younger self "my strange friend". I would refer to my eighteen or nineteen year old self as "my vague, hesitant and ideologically faulty younger self".

But the fact remained that the mood on campus seemed a long way from the swinging sixties or the happening seventies. It was strangely subdued, business like, conservative. People came to Uni, attended lectures, and then went home to study.



Things improved in second and third years. I got to know people. I sipped the odd beer on long sunny afternoons at the Manning Bar and almost thought I had made it. But my high expectations made it inevitable that university would be a disappointment. I emerged three years down the track with a pass degree. I never gave honours a second thought. I was in a hurry to leave and find a job, to mix in the real world. What job? I had no idea.

In the long term I am glad that I completed a Bachelor of Arts. The study of Arts can be an easy target because the degree doesn't always give you a qualification for a specific profession or vocation. But there are few better degrees for developing critical and analytical skills (of thinking "outside the square") that some students abandon back in high school.

Meanwhile, today's undergraduates undertake studies in the shadow of a brave new world rationalization and user pays. Was I witnessing the end of an era? Perhaps, but some things remain, despite the best efforts of some politicians. Students can still get the odd beer in, promenade down the walkway past Carslaw, or recline gracefully on the University lawns. Particularly, mutter the engineers, if you're an Arts student.