

720 ABC Perth: Interview with drive presenter Jane Marwick on higher education.

Dr Alan Finkel was interviewed on 720 ABC Perth about loosening the link between university degrees and careers following the publication of an opinion piece in The Australian newspaper.

Jane Marwick: What about the expectations that degrees and careers need to be tightly linked? Dr Alan Finkel writes the odds of a law graduate enjoying a long-term career are pretty slim, so too economics graduates. So who is on the verge of over-supply? Has our push for tertiary qualifications and degrees been on the right track, or is it time for a re-think. Dr Alan Finkel joins me now – good afternoon and welcome to 720 Drive.

Alan Finkel: Good afternoon Jane.

Jane Marwick: Dr Alan Finkel, you write that we are in an era of mass tertiary education. You hear anecdotally, families say ‘this child’ or ‘I’m the first one to go to university from my family’. Australians really have jumped at the opportunity to get to university. But is there a downside – is it a good thing that we leave school and go straight off to university – or is it a double edged sword sometimes?

Alan Finkel: Well Jane it depends on your thinking. I feel that it is time to modernise our expectations of university degrees. Society evolves. Going back roughly 50 years – probably 50% of high school students stayed to what we then called Form 4 – which is Year 10 now. And then they stayed till Form 5, and that was called Leaving, in the 60s and 70s. By the 1980s, it was expected that at least half of higher school students would stay right through until Year 12. But then most of them would go off after Year 12 and only about 10 per cent, 40 years ago, would go to university. But we’ve made the commitment to higher education, we have new expectations.

Most of the people in our service economy are the sort of people you’d like to have an articulate conversation with. And that has been growing and growing, and we hit what I refer to as the tipping point four years ago in 2012 where just over 50% of all school leavers enrolled in university. And another 25 per cent enrolled in the vocational education sector. So you had well over 75%, something approaching 80% of students, entering tertiary education – nearly four fifths. That is a massive change from 20 or 30 or 40 years ago. It indicates that we have the expectation that nearly everybody who wants to, has the right to a tertiary education.

Jane Marwick: I was back at university as a mature-aged student Dr Finkel, and one of the things I did notice was the numbers of school leavers into university in first year – a lot of them saying they didn’t know what they wanted to do but they were just going to get a degree. So it might have been an arts degree or an economics degree or a science degree and then hopefully that would steer them in a direction. I also noticed that a lot of them dropped out halfway through and said I’m not ready for this, I’m going off on a gap year. Are we putting some unrealistic expectations on this generation that they need a degree, that they need to get to university when perhaps it’s not for everyone – but there is a pressure there now do you think?

Alan Finkel: I’ll agree with you that university is not for everybody, in fact tertiary education is not necessarily for everybody, but I’d hope we can offer a variety of opportunities to young people so that they can at least give it a try. We need to make sure that the vocational education sector gives solid opportunities to young people to get a qualification that they can use for their own career advantage. And when it comes to university, it’s almost as if everything has become generalist as you said in your introduction. The chances of a law student having a long-term job as a lawyer is very

slim, I'll put a number on that, it is probably around one in eight. And the opportunity for an economics graduate to have a career as an economist is about one in twenty. But that doesn't mean that if they don't work in exactly the field they were trained in, that in any way they should be considered a failure.

Because any degree that you do is going to expose you to a way of attacking problems, learning something very, very well. And what I say to young people is do something you enjoy, because if you are doing something you are enthusiastic about you'll do it better. The most important thing about university degrees is to deeply dive into the discipline and do it really, really well. Because once you have done a degree of some kind and obtained knowledge deeply once – it is quite easy to do it again in a new area on the job and have a second career or third career. But you need to learn how to do the first deep dive experience well, and I would argue that the best place to do that is at a university or perhaps a TAFE.

Jane Marwick: You talk about in your column today, you say consider for example the falling minimum ATAR entry levels observed across institutions and courses, you say if we recruit more students it is a mathematical certainty that we will accept students we would have turned away before. Why the surprise, it is just the tenacity of the old expectations. Is that a good thing?

Alan Finkel: We as a society have made the decision that we would like to support our young people getting tertiary education. So it's not possible for more than half of the people to be above average. I mean, average is the middle. It's a mathematical certainty, as I said, that if there are 53% of students going to university, that some of them will be below the median. And why not? Why should they be denied that opportunity?

If we are giving them that opportunity then we have to change our thinking. 30 or 40 years ago we thought, well if someone goes to university and does engineering, or law, or medicine, or science, they'll have a career that is a linear extension from what they did in their undergraduate degree. But now that we have moved towards a service economy – it's just not possible for everybody who does a degree to get a job that is directly linked to their undergraduate discipline.

Jane Marwick: And you're a good case in point aren't you Dr Finkel?

Alan Finkel: Well, yes I guess I am. But I'm not all that unusual. I started off as an electrical engineer – I did that for quite some time. Then I got into neuroscience – so I became a neuroscientist and I did a postdoctoral fellowship in neuroscience and then I became a businessman manufacturing scientific equipment and then I got into education, and policy, and publishing – it almost gets easier and easier.

Jane Marwick: Well I would imagine there will be people driving home from university this afternoon very pleased to hear that, thinking oh we're into term 2, I've got all of these assignments – is this degree just the first. But to hear that you started as an electrical engineer and took all those twists and turns is probably very heartening Dr Finkel.

Alan Finkel: Well thank you for that comment, but I must assure you that there are many people who have the enthusiasm to take those turns. The most important thing is to be open to opportunity, and to be prepared for it. And a university degree is good preparation for opportunity.

Jane Marwick: Dr Alan Finkel, Australia's Chief Scientist – thank you for joining us on 720 Drive this afternoon.