

Qualified to eye a career

An ideal job on graduation? Dream on, writes **Brook McCarthy**

IN the short life of a high school graduate, deciding what to do after finishing school is a big deal. With no clear and mighty life purpose, my reasoning was based on considerations such as: How many courses are required to qualify for a concession card? Will university improve my chances with the opposite sex? And, most important, how to appear to know what I'm doing?

Changing your mind is an art form for my generation of twenty-somethings. Being ambitious as well as confused, I found full-time occupation in sketching fanciful details of my dream life.

Enrolling in university broke my paralysis, although I had told all who would listen that I was off overseas as soon as I'd saved the air fare. The reason for this abrupt change of plans was meteorological. My already ambivalent attitude to job hunting was further dampened by constant February rain. I chose religious studies as my major because of its implicit promise of wisdom and the accompanying possibility of attaining enlightenment. I wanted nothing less than a meaningful life (and devotees).

Several years and misadventures later, my debt with the Australian Government has yet to be paid by customers seeking advice on suitable religions, though I am ready when this market booms.

My more recent decision to return to university was based on determination to choose a course with a clear career path. Although the religious studies degree had helped me land a job as a tour leader in Asia, tourists were generally far less curious about Sanskrit and Buddhism than they were about the location of the nearest toilet. No longer content to be a tour leader, a meditation teacher or a waiter, I wanted to qualify for

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interesting, meaningful and well-paid employment.

I enrolled in a masters of international relations believing it could lead to three of my (many) ideal jobs: journalism, diplomacy or charity work. Yet I found myself once again in the much-maligned arts department. Although I could happily spend the rest of my life in arts (so long as a patron finally discovers me), I feel threatened by the same accusations of irrelevance and funding shortfalls that arts departments face across the country.

Midway through first semester, I was persuaded by a well-meaning classmate to accompany her to a career fair. Shuffling through a crush of students, it soon became clear that this career fair was a love-in for multinationals and students of business, accounting and engineering, and we were the ugly, unwelcome relatives. This debacle had a brief respite at the exhibition stand of one of the big four banks where, after several probing questions, the bank's recruiter conceded that human resources graduates might also be needed.

Such a shame, then, that a gig in a bank's HR department is not part of my universe.

I sought guidance from one of my lecturers on possible careers for

course graduates. He remarked that everyone in my course wanted to get into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, not knowing that this was also my ambition. Given the competition, he concluded that everyone had Buckley's chance. I did a passable impression of acting amused. Fancy thinking it was possible to penetrate this fortress of energetic over-achievers on the strength of a dog-eared passport and a love of Asian food!

Using my imagination to find jobs to fit my skills and interests has worked so far. While accepting my trial-and-error career detours, I have caught myself gazing wistfully at skyscrapers. I imagine contented people ensconced in training, career progression and regular working hours. Well-dressed, organised and in-control people who pontificate at the photocopier, cavort at the water cooler and flirt confidently over Friday night drinks paid for by their employer.

Following my passion is the only viable option I see. Desiring certainty is understandable but possibly unrealistic. I now see that choosing a university degree to match an occupation can be a gamble, especially in industries where qualifications are numerous and varied or where change is so constant that knowledge quickly becomes outdated.

Creativity is essential to the art of matching work experience and education to job descriptions, to seeing possibilities for career advancement in related professions and to recognising opportunities.

While I am still uncertain about exactly what I can expect from my postgraduate qualifications, my non-conventional undergraduate degree has at least taught me the importance of creativity, not to mention its relevance to interesting dinner party conversations.