

The Sydney Morning Herald

National [University](#)

This was published 1 year ago

OPINION

I thought I was a 'high achiever'. Then I got to university



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March 3, 2024 – 4.00pm

I was one of those unusual people who absolutely loved high school. It was a place where academic success was rewarded, rules were clear, friends were plentiful, and you got chat breaks every hour or so.

It was fun to spend all day giggling with friends, passing notes in class and whispering about boys. I liked learning, but most of all I loved getting good marks, revelling in the praise of teachers, parents and friends.



In high school, I was the high achiever. But that changed when I arrived at university. ISTOCK

I was definitely a nerd, but I think I was a cool-ish one. I studied hard but went to parties, got great marks but would happily show up late to class because I was kissing my hot boyfriend behind the back building.

When I started Year 11, my parents were going through a divorce, and academic success became a way to be seen among the chaos. It was one place I could shine. By the end of the year, I was excelling in all subjects.

As people praised my effort and my intelligence, I started to build a sense of self upon the flimsy foundation that I was clever. Maybe even special.

My hard work paid off. I got a cracking ATAR. I had an article published on a prominent website. I was accepted into my dream degree: journalism at the University of Technology Sydney. It felt like I had the whole world at my feet – at least, that’s what everyone kept telling me. “You can do anything,” was the mantra. I honestly believed it.

And then I started uni.

On my first visit to UTS, I couldn’t believe how big it was. The campus was scattered all over Ultimo. There were students everywhere. I couldn’t find my classroom. When I finally located the lecture hall, it was filled with hundreds of other nervous teenagers, eager to make their mark. A room full of high achievers. A room full of duxes. Everyone here had been special at school. Now, nobody was.

While I’d found school engaging, the uni coursework was punishing. The lectures were long and complicated, the readings impossible to finish. There were people in my course who effortlessly used words like “milieu” and “diaspora”, while I was struggling to define them. It was like learning a whole new language.

Unlike my high school teachers, who had nurtured and cared for me, my uni tutors didn't know me from a bar of soap. I found it hard to make friends – there were so many people in the course, and after class they disappeared into the city. It would take me all semester to develop a rapport with my classmates, and then we'd change subjects, and I'd never see them again.

I got my first pass grade. It was devastating, but not entirely surprising (I still couldn't work out how to use “milieu” in a sentence). The worst part was that nobody cared about my “terrible” mark. My tutor didn't want a word after class to ask me what happened, as my high school teachers would have. A pass was fine. It did the job. But I had placed so much of my own value on being one of the cleverest, so anything less was crushing.

Uni is nothing like school. You aren't told off for missing class or doing poorly on an assessment. Nobody ensures you're making friends or notices if you're struggling. You aren't praised for your hard work or congratulated on your achievement – even your high distinctions are delivered via an online portal after the class is over. If you want community and connection, you have to seek it out: join a club, be part of the student newspaper, connect with a sports team. The opportunities are there, but it's up to you to find them.

I did well at uni, in the end. Academically speaking. But I still regret not making more friends, not getting involved in uni life. Because that, I think, would have bolstered my spirit when I received that “pass” grade. It would have made the study less important. If there's one thing uni taught me, by the end, it's that we need relationships far more than we realise. Far more, even, than we need those high distinctions. Because now, nobody cares about my passes or high distinctions. Not even me.

I look back on my uni years not with rose-tinted glasses but with relief that they're finally over. And I think, if I had focused less on praise and performance and more on people, perhaps it could have been different.

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