TAFE and universities have for a long time been contrasted as forms of education, and the debate is getting stronger as people increasingly argue that we have too much emphasis on university education and not enough on the TAFE option. One suspects that some of that argument is inspired by financial rather than educational motives, but there is no doubt of the vigour of the argument.

On both sides, those advocating more emphasis on TAFE and those defending the universities, there are often claims that TAFE is more practical, more vocational, more applied, while universities are more theoretical, less directly vocational. In this debate it often happens that one side sees the universities are providing 'education' while TAFE provides 'training'; the other side sees TAFE as dealing with the real world of work, while universities are ivory towers and cloisters of academic unreality.

I have never studied nor taught in the TAFE sector, so I can make no comment about it. I do know something about universities and the history of Western education—and the contrast mentioned above is not only nonsense but damaging nonsense.

I spent my life in the oldest subject in the Western curriculum, Classics—the study of the culture of the ancient Greeks and Romans. My particular area of interest was the history of their education and the influence of their ideas on later European (and therefore American and Australian) education.

Education has always been vocational. The study of literature and of rhetoric (now we call it 'communication') was to equip men to express their thoughts clearly and powerfully for a political or administrative career, right from its Greek beginnings. The study of philosophy, which in any developed sense began with Plato in the fourth century BC, was to equip political leaders to make right judgements. These are both vocational purposes.

The study of Latin and Greek grammar and literature and philosophy in the Middle Ages was to equip people to become clergy. Christianity is a 'religion of a book' and its professionals—its clergy, need to be able to read and understand the Bible and to draw philosophical, theological and ethical conclusions from it. The oldest universities, at Bologna, Montpellier and Paris, began as places to train people for vocations—in Bologna as lawyers, in Montpellier in medicine, in Paris as clergy.

Their educational structures were modelled on the guilds or trade associations of the time, with their apprenticeships, journeymen and masters; the modern bachelor's degree completes the apprenticeship, the master's degree completes the professional formation.

Indeed, Oxford and Cambridge remained exclusively places to train Anglican clergy until
the middle of the nineteenth century. When they finally relaxed religious tests for entry and broadened their curricula, they became also places to train schoolmasters, the civil service and other administrators and professional scholars to staff the new universities which arose in the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century in Britain.

The first Australian universities, Sydney (1851) and Melbourne (1857) were established explicitly not for ivory tower education but to provide doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers for the infant colonies.

There is not a much more applied study anywhere than medicine or dentistry or engineering or architecture or veterinary science, all of which are strong in the university sector.

The great majority of students nowadays who go to university expect that it will help them to get better jobs than if they did not go. It is a myth that students go to university out of pure love of learning. Even the students of so-called useless subjects—like literature, philosophy and history, expect to be helped vocationally by their studies, and the employment statistics show that they are.

That does not mean that the students don’t have, or develop, a love of learning. Many people enjoy their work and the preparation for employment; those who don’t are likely to be less successful employees.

Universities don’t have any monopoly on students who enjoy what they are doing; they abound in the TAFE sector and in traineeships and other forms of adult education and in many other occupations.

The contrast between ‘vocational’ and ‘educational’ is false and damaging. Every student in any sector should be developing some general abilities: to understand complicated ideas or processes, to communicate clearly in writing and speech, to work with others, to find out what they don’t already know, to see where their work fits into their society.

Every teacher, whether of pure mathematics or pastry-cooking, should be developing these abilities in students. The attempt to separate these general abilities from the more immediate ones, of mathematical or pastrycooking processes, and to teach only the immediate ones, means that you get an ill-developed mathematician or a pastrycook or doctor or engineer or nurses—or whatever.

The idea that the more general subjects, such as literature, history, philosophy, mathematics, physics are useless is also false and damaging. If graduates in these fields have had developed in them the abilities mentioned above, then they have been well prepared for a wide range of employment, in administration, teaching, communications, journalism in all its forms and many other fields.

Of course there are many specialised areas—where specialised knowledge is required; but in the complexities of the modern world, where it sometimes seems that everything is interrelated to everything else, specialisation alone is seldom enough.

It would be better if people gave up dividing education into ‘vocational’ and ‘general’ and ensured that all of it, in any field, included the development of the generic abilities plus some special competence in which those abilities can find their first scope.

Five or ten years down the track, most people will have moved away from merely practising their special competence to more senior positions where the broader abilities are far more important.

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