Catholic Education
Commission NSW

Choosing Wisely, Choosing Well

Advising Year 10 students on their choice of HSC Programs of Study

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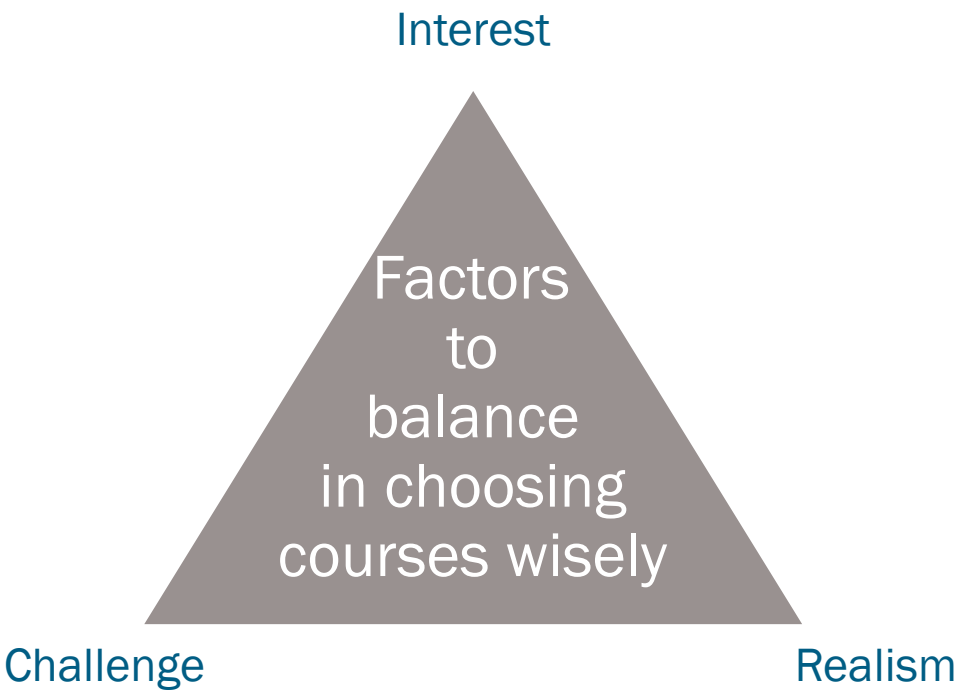
Balancing **interest**, **challenge** and **realism** gives the best chance of positive outcomes within school and beyond



Year 10 students rely heavily on their teachers and leaders within their schools for advice on choice of courses for their Year 11 and 12 program of study. Consistency and utility in this advice is critical.

Teachers are placed in a conflicted position when they are asked for such advice. There is a desire to do the best for the student, and also potentially the desire to protect a student from 'drowning' in a course s/he just is not capable of. There is a need to promote the teacher's course to ensure that enough students choose it, but this can lead to a temptation to over-sell it.

Good advice to students will adequately balance three critical factors:

- Interest in the course
- Challenge
- Realism

Hattie[1] notes that of the 138 meta-analyses he considered as affecting student achievement, the number 1 position, with an effect size of 1.44, is taken by "student self-report grades" – i.e., the student's expectation of him/herself.

Academic self-concept is the softest putty in the teacher's hands, is influenced strongly by the nature of the feedback the teacher provides the student[2] , and is critical in the process of working with students to wisely choose a program of study.

(Note that it is self-concept, rather than self-esteem, that we as teachers should be working for. Adolescents often have a suspicion bordering on hostility for attempts to directly address their self-esteem. Rather, a healthy self-esteem is the by-product of a developing self-concept, which is what shapes self-expectation.)

It is teachers' expectations of students – their real expectations which are inferred by the student rather than those explicitly stated by the teacher – that are among the strongest influences on student academic self-concept. The "soft bigotry of low expectations" can too easily lead students to a failure-avoidance approach that yields the expected low results. The critical influence of teachers' high expectations of students – both in setting up for their HSC and throughout Stage 6 – is hard to over-state.

The challenge for us all as teachers is to understand intelligence and ability not as fixed characteristics of a student, but as qualities which can be developed. You can learn to be smart. There are many different ways of being smart. The HSC program gives each student, properly supported, a valuable opportunity to explore his or her own ways of being capable.

A word of caution in terminology here. Many schools refer to this process as "subject selection". It is better described as "course preferences". Students choose courses (such as English Standard, or Mathematics General) rather than subjects (such as English or Mathematics). Often "which course" is the significant question. Secondly, if they see themselves as selecting a course, rather than expressing a preference for it, it can become locked-in in their minds as definite. Other factors (enough peers choosing a particular course to enable it to be taught within the school, timetable clashes, advice on appropriate levels within a subject, etc) influence whether a student actually enrols in a course. By describing the process as the students' expression of course preferences it is clearly signalled that there are other factors beyond the student's expression that will determine what s/he undertakes.

1 Hattie, J.A. (2009), *Visible Learning*, London: Routledge

2 Hattie, J.A. (2012), Visible Learning for Teachers, (Chapter 7) London: Routledge

Interest

Students should be strongly encouraged to undertake courses they have a genuine interest in. The motivation and drive that come from interest can be the crucial factor in the hard work of Years 11 and 12.

A prospective career direction might indicate interest, but it is important to test this strongly with students. A student who wants to do Physics only because s/he wants to be a fighter pilot – but whose only interest in doing Physics is that it is a perceived requirement of the career – probably needs to do some better thinking about career. For most students, the discussion at this stage needs to be about those aspects of their study that lead to employability, rather than directly to employment. Students should consider having a spread of courses which will enable them to undertake a range of post-school careers and study options.

It is important to engage parents in consideration of each of the three factors being balanced in course preferences, most particularly with the importance of student interest. The transitional and transformative nature of adolescence makes the course preference discussion an opportunity for growth.

There are two problems for students (and parents and teachers helping them) in discerning "interest". The first is that often the student has little or no idea of what courses s/he might be interested in, as much of the Stage 6 curriculum is unfamiliar. Schools have many ways of getting students to engage with course offerings: Stage 6 Course Booklets, taster courses, "Subject Fairs" etc. A "Courses Quiz" (requiring student knowledge of the Stage 6 curriculum document) can be a fun way of ensuring that the content of the course offering has been considered. Importantly in this process, if the student focuses on producing a long ranked list of preferences, rather than a final ("fixed"?) list of 5 or 6 selections, it is more likely s/he will get a real consideration of the available courses.

The second issue with interest is that some courses are compulsory. It is useful at this stage to shift the conversation from 'interest' to 'challenge'.

Challenge

Students do well when they stretch themselves beyond what they thought they were capable of. It is important in course preference advice to encourage realistic aspiration.

Sometimes when a teacher encourages a student, both end up disappointed with the result. That is not a reason to avoid encouraging and challenging the student. The most important indicator of the work teachers do with students is not where the students end up, but the difference that has been made along the way. The stronger the challenge, the greater that difference is likely to be.

Data from the HSC Data Analysis Project over the last 15 years has shown that Catholic schools do not do a particularly good job of challenging students who are capable of good achievement into more difficult courses.[3] Catholic schools are under-represented in high-level courses, even when measures of "ability" are taken into account.

It may be that this under-representation is a result of a (caring but misguided) wish to spare the student from struggling. Many capable students progress through their schooling with little experience of struggle until they take on a difficult course at the Stage 6 level. This experience can lead directly to a self-concept revision: "I can't do Extension Maths". It takes expert feedback from the teacher to guide the student through process to product to direction.

Changing the conversation from "are you good enough to do this course?" to "if you stretch yourself, you could do really well at this" puts demands on both the teacher and the student, but by challenging the student's self-concept gives a much better chance of his/her achieving a personal best.

It is worth noting that some universities are now proposing to

3 DeCourcy, J.S. (2015) *HSC Data Analysis Project: HSC 2014*, Sydney: Catholic Education Commission; Cooney, G. (2016) *Student Performance and Participation in High-level Higher School Certificate courses*, Sydney: Catholic Education Commission

address the lack of challenge in some students' course choices by making Mathematics 2U a prerequisite for many of their degrees which have a mathematical or scientific basis. Other degrees such as those for teaching are proposing prerequisites also.

It is the feedback that we give when we are not particularly intending to give feedback that has a significant impact on student self-concept. The course preference process is an important example of this.

Realism

We need to develop a realistic sense with students of what they are currently capable of, how they can improve and develop their capacity, and what is needed for success in particular HSC courses.

Balancing this with the need to challenge students takes skill. It is just as easy for the student who needs to hear the 'challenge' message to instead hear 'realism' and therefore decide to do an easier course, as it is for a student who needs to hear the 'realism' message to do the opposite.

A critical part of the realism message is to be realistic about the effect of course preference on the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR process is a fair and balanced way of comparing results in each course with those in every other course. There is no way of manipulating the process to gain a better ATAR other than by hard work and application.

Ideally, there should be no discussion of ATAR in working with students who are shaping their course preferences, for the simple reason that the way the ATAR works provides no useful guidance to which courses a student should do. Of course, we do not live in an ideal world and both students and parents will often raise the ATAR question. Our response needs to be clear: the best way to maximise an ATAR (and prospects beyond school) is to enrol in courses balancing interest, challenge and realism then to work hard over Years 11 and 12.

Attempting to 'sell' a particular course on the grounds that "it scales well for the ATAR" is both misleading and unprofessional. It is true that some courses have higher means after scaling for the ATAR. This reflects the fact that they have been undertaken by students whose achievement in their other courses has been relatively high. It promises nothing to the student who enrols in that course other than his/her achievement will be fairly compared with that of other students.

The advice to students is clear: Don't try to play ATAR games. Students who are contemplating further study at university need to ensure that they select courses that provide a suitable preparation for their proposed university course. A high ATAR of itself will not ensure success.

Some input to this discussion for the student who needs myths about ATARs de-bunked is provided by the "Ranked-All" report (Report 7) provided to schools as part of the HSC Data Analysis package. This report lists all of the results obtained by students in the school in the last year in approximate order of their ranking on the ATAR/TES scale. There are two important considerations in using this report:

1. **Equivalence:** Marks in different courses which are at much the same position on this ranked report are to a good approximation equivalent in their contribution to an ATAR
2. **Frequency:** You need to look at how often a particular course has results in the range being examined, to see where you are likely to get a high result. A Board mark of 91 in English Standard is roughly equivalent on the ATAR/TES scale to a Board mark of 91 in English Advanced, but many more students gain marks in this range in English Advanced than in English Standard – over 99% of English Standard results are Band 5 or below. (Note that while this is not as clear in Mathematics, the Board has announced that General Mathematics and Mathematics 2U will now be marked on a common scale. This change will place Mathematics in the same situation as English.)

Keeping the Balance

The challenge for all teachers is to keep the balance between these factors clear for all students. Some are unduly influenced by peers or slightly older students, and choose based on their advice rather than the student's own interest. Others need support to stretch their aspirations. Some are quite unrealistic in their belief in being able to game the system by using ATAR scaling as their free ticket to success.

The student derives the greatest benefit – and the best clarity in what is for many a complex set of choices – when the advice from all teachers is consistently focused on the student's needs and **interests,** that **challenges** him/her to stretch their aspirations, and that accurately and **realistically** reflects both the student's readiness and the nature of the HSC.