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TITLE: Don't Just Rush into Any Old Career

AUTHOR: Clive Hamilton

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The pressures on teenagers today are immense. Many are convinced that their entire lives will be determined by one number — their ENTER score. A life of success or failure seems to hinge on it.

What a cruel message to send to young people — cruel because it is wrong. Many who do not do well at school or university go on to have highly successful careers. And many who perform brilliantly at school and university somehow end up living obscure and unsatisfying lives.

The pressure on them is particularly intense. I met a mother who said her son did not do so well in one of his VCE exams and attained an ENTER score of "only" 99.5. Both mother and son were disappointed because he would not get into medicine. Poor boy — his mother is crestfallen, he thinks he's a failure and everyone else thinks he's an ingrate.

When I failed year 12 the world did not end. I hated school and it showed. I was lucky that I had the chance to repeat the year, but I still only scraped into university. I envied my peers who seemed to know exactly what they wanted to do with their lives and went off and did it. But after a while I realised that they are a tiny minority and even they are sometimes mistaken.

Most of us have no good idea of what we want to be or where we want to end up. How can we with so little experience of life?

Nothing is more demoralising than to hear a cocky sports star declare that "you can achieve anything you want as long as you want it badly enough". This is manifestly untrue. The implication is that all of those who came second, third or last did not want to win badly enough. And it sends the message to everyone else that if they have not realised their dreams it is because they have failed a test of character.

It takes most people many years to work out who they are and what they should do with their lives. I began to work it out only when I was nearly 30. Some become stuck in a rut, dug for them at school, and stop asking the question. They may be very successful on the outside but die with a lifetime of regrets.

Far too many students want to get into medicine or law simply because of the status. I have lost count of the number of disillusioned young lawyers I have met who start work at one of the big law firms and soon realise that, for them, hell would be ending

up like their bosses. And next time you visit your GP look into his or her eyes and ask yourself whether they are feeling it was all worthwhile.

One young woman of my acquaintance, a top maths student at school, was convinced by her parents and teachers she was a natural for engineering. After a semester of loathing engineering, she switched to her real passion, primary school teaching, which she loves. Which would you rather be — a miserable engineer or a happy teacher?

I interviewed one woman whose parents were determined she should be a dentist. After studying dentistry at university, she realised she hated it. But under pressure she persevered and qualified as a dentist. After another five years of looking into people's mouths, she said to herself: "I am not going to do this any more."

So she summoned her courage, faced up to her parents' disappointment, and abandoned dentistry to retrain as a career counsellor — a pretty good choice for someone who had made such a big career blunder. She gets paid much less but the non-pecuniary rewards are enormous.

In a way, she had to become a dentist before she could figure out what she truly wanted. Many people go through several phases before they work it out. The thing is, there is plenty of time — 40 years or more. Most generation Ys can expect to have several career changes in a life of work, often interspersed with time out to care for others.

And it's not so much that we have to keep searching until we find the one thing we truly want to be; what we truly want to be may change as we mature. A radical life change does not mean rejecting the past but building on it. The renewal of our calling can be one of the most exciting and enriching aspects of life.

Many young people discover that not getting what they want is the best thing that could happen to them, because they had their hearts set on something for the wrong reasons — parental pressure, money hunger, fad-following, or sheer ignorance about what certain occupations involve.

Within the first two years of a degree, about a quarter of students change their courses or leave university. For many, they are fixing a mistake. Or they may find they are not ready for university life. This is why a gap year is so valuable. Students who arrive on campus after a year or two of working and travel are no longer exhausted by the trials of the VCE. They have some life experience and know why they are at university.

It is well known that a mature-age student whose entry score was so-so will usually outperform the school leaver with top marks. Taking some time off, studying at TAFE or working for a few years may be the best path to university. Mature students know what they want and have the life skills to make sure they get it. So for those students contemplating their futures with doubt and anxiety, just remember — there's plenty of time.

Dr Clive Hamilton is executive director of the Australia Institute, a Canberra think tank. In February, he will leave the institute for a career change.