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# DOWNUNDER GRADS



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## SERIES SYNOPSIS

It's the start of the semester at one of Australia's top universities and 37,000 students are about to embark on their studies.

University is make or break time; a time that can change people forever. From free education in the 1980s to HECS fee debt and a large increase in full fee paying students, university education is now big business.

Through a variety of stories this four-part series explores the contemporary Australian university experience of both international and Australian students from a range of different backgrounds.

*Downunder Grads* gives a special insight into the particular challenges facing this generation of students. Each character-driven story reveals the trials and triumphs of young people as they strive to make a life for themselves.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

Curriculum links include Careers, Media Studies, English, Drama, SOSE/HSIE (Social Studies), Education and Politics.

## EPISODE 1: IN THE MIX



This episode looks at the ways two international students and one student from rural Queensland adapt to life at the University of Queensland (UQ), the expected and unexpected issues and problems they encounter, and how they respond to a range of academic, personal, social and cultural challenges in their new environment.

## PREPARATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Are Wei Wei, Emily and Gurteaj adequately prepared for embarking on their courses of study at UQ and for campus life? Are their motivations and expectations realistic?

- Discuss in class the reasons each of the three students

has travelled, in some cases extremely long distances, to study at UQ, and what they hope or expect to achieve. Are they confident about their aims? On arrival do they express concerns about whether or not they will succeed? To what extent do parental expectations and/or other factors play in the decision to study at UQ?

- Discuss why international student Wei Wei, when looking for off-campus accommodation, seems concerned about the existence of spiders. In what ways may this indicate a broader issue of what international students know of Australia, or have been led to believe, before they arrive in the country? Would a 'local' student have the same areas of concern?
- Following from the previous discussion, in pairs or small groups research the advertising methods and promotional material being used by one Australian tertiary or TAFE college to attract prospective fee-paying international students from non English-speaking countries such as China and Indonesia to study at their campuses. Present a report, assessing the effectiveness, validity and accuracy of the methods and material, the success rates of recruitment, and the later retention of students once they have arrived and embarked on their courses. Does the information imparted to prospective students amount to 'spin-doctoring' or even misinformation? If you think it necessary, suggest changes to the ways courses, residential accommodation, student life and general culture are promoted to prospective students.
- Discuss then write possible reasons why, as stated in the program by Emily, 90-95 percent of international students from the USA leave Australia after completing their courses without having made one Australian friend. How does Emily prepare to counteract this situation? Do you think she fully succeeds? Does a six-month student-exchange arrangement offer enough time in which to become acculturated and to meet people? What else do you think could be done by both international and local students, and perhaps by the campus administration, to redress the problem?
- For secondary students: your school has decided to institute an international student-exchange one-semester program. Discuss in class first, then in pairs devise an illustrated pamphlet for prospective international students about the school campus, the curriculum, the local culture and environment, student accommodation and anything else considered important or relevant. Produce the pamphlet using desktop publishing software. (Alternatives may be



to work in larger groups to produce a short video program or some website pages.)

- After viewing Gurteaj's story, imagine yourself in his position then write a letter or an email to a friend back home in regional Australia about your recent experiences in arriving at the campus to begin your degree course and in moving into International House as a student resident. (There may be a range of emotions and reactions to express; you will have to decide how 'open' you will be.)

### REALITIES AND PRESSURES

For Wei Wei, Emily and Gurteaj, do the realities of life at UQ meet with their expectations? Have their preparations been adequate?

- Discuss in class, then write notes about the range of obstacles and problems placed in the way of each of the three students, both in and out of the classroom, as they progress through their semester. How does each react to, cope with and resolve these issues? Did they foresee these issues arising, or were they unexpected? In their shoes would you have responded differently?
- If possible, working in pairs, interview some international students enrolled on an Australian campus. To what extent do they believe that their expectations of study in Australia accord with the realities they have since experienced on and off campus? Present a report detailing their views, their areas of concern, what they feel they have achieved, existing difficulties they have yet to overcome, whether they have made Australian friends or confined themselves to their own national or cultural groups, and whether the college student/staff body and administration have offered due support, made them feel welcome and included in general campus cultural life.
- What do you think each student in this episode gained and learnt from their experiences throughout their semester at UQ? Imagine that you are one of the three and in your own words reflect on your time

at the university in a set of personal diary entries.

- Research, debate and write an argumentative and explanatory appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages to everyone concerned of the international fee-paying system of tertiary and TAFE studies in Australia.

## EPISODE 2: THE BIG SQUEEZE

This episode offers an insight into the changed nature of tertiary education expenditure in Australia, the rise in the phenomenon of 'user pays' and the ways in which student life on campus has had to adapt to meet these altered economic, political, commercial and business-oriented realities.

### FUNDING AND SURVIVING

One way or another the three students featured in this episode—Lucy Weber, Lara Nobel and Jin (Leo) Yongzhe—are affected by funding issues, the thin spread of resources and their need to fight for survival and success. We see how emotionally demanding and exhausting it is, not only for them but for those around them, their colleagues, lecturers and parents.

- Discuss in class and write notes on the issues each of the three students grapples with. Choose from one or more of: the funding of their tertiary courses (including student loans and repayments), the campus facilities enabling them to participate in their courses, increased competition amongst students for high grades and the resourcing of student services on campus. From what you observe during Episode 2, discuss whether you believe it is possible or even advisable for these students to participate fully in the general educational, cultural and social life that a university has traditionally, in the past, offered outside of basic academic course pursuits. (Students may wish to view the Four Corners TV program, *The Degree Factories*; a transcript and online discussion is also available. See references.)
- Carry out research then write a report describing the ways in which Australian tertiary courses are funded.



In the report examine issues such as the difference between full-fee and part-fee course payments by students, participation of the Australian government in the funding of courses, the HECS-HELP student loans schemes, and the ways in which international and Australian-resident students have their courses paid for.

- Following from the above activity, and using statistical information such as tables and graphs where applicable, present a report showing:
  - » the numbers of Australian students enrolled in full-fee courses in comparison to those in part-fee courses, and whether there are any students enrolled in courses fully-funded by government or other sources
  - » the numbers of students who take out HECS-HELP loans to enable them to complete their courses
  - » the enrolment fees for a range of courses (e.g. Arts, Medicine, Law, Education)
  - » the amount of loans students are required to repay, and whether this has risen over the years since the HECS scheme began
  - » whether the loans offered to students via the HECS-HELP scheme are being, or are likely to be recouped
  - » whether you believe any alterations should be made to the current system of funding.
- During the program Lucy offers two reasons in favour of free higher education. Carry out research, debate in class then write an analytical argument appraising the advantages and disadvantages of fully-free (government-funded) higher education in comparison to a student fee-paying system. Include discussion on whether your views extend to international as well as Australian-resident students and to both undergraduate and post-graduate students.

### STUDENT UNIONS

This episode raises issues about the necessity of student unions on campus.

- Research, then discuss in class and write notes on the purpose and relevance of student unions, the range of services they provide and resource and how they contribute to the cultural life of the tertiary education environment. How are they funded? When did student unionism cease to be compulsory for all

students at tertiary campuses, and why? What effect does this have on the present and future existence of student unions?

- As though you were Lucy Weber, write an email to a friend describing your role as president of the student union, the difficult decisions you have to make and the various functions and concerns of the union.
- Discuss in class, then write a magazine article for secondary students presenting your opinions and arguments as to whether membership to tertiary student unions should be compulsory, as in the past, or voluntary, as at present.
- Working in threes, take on the roles of an international student such as Leo Yongzhe, a local Australian student such as Lara Nobel and a reporter from the student newspaper (perhaps Wei Wei, from Episode 1). Draft and conduct an interview in which the reporter questions the students about whether the union addresses their own individual concerns. Record it for playback on your college intranet.



### EPISODE 3: TESTING TIMES

This episode looks at the intense emotional pressures, the inner drive and desire, the desperation, the guilt, risk-taking and the states of mind underlying the academic endeavours of contemporary tertiary students.

#### DREAMS AND GOALS

The three students presented in this episode—Toby Latcham, Tsuyoshi Osagawa and Alejandra (Ale) Arbe—are each beset or obsessed by a range of personal predicaments, possibly of their own making, that could easily destroy their dreams of academic success and impact heavily on their future lives.

- Discuss in class then make notes on the dreams and long-term plans each of the three students has in pursuing his or her chosen course of study. Comment

on the realistic nature of their aims and beliefs. Why, for example, does Toby enrol simultaneously for three different degree courses? What are Tsuyoshi's motivations for studying in Australia? Why does Ale feel the need to achieve 'straight sevens' (the highest marks) in her veterinary science course?

- If you were able to talk to each of the three students separately either before or during their courses, what would you say to them, what advice or emotional support do you feel you could offer them? As a friend, write a different email to each of them. What would you say, for example, about Ale's reluctance to enter a classroom when late for her first lecture, or Tsuyoshi's comments about 'Crocodile Dundee' Australians, or Toby's view that he won't regret his actions until he is 70 years old? (For this activity you may wish to recall and draw upon aspects from other sections of the series, such as the comments of Lara Nobel's father in Episode 2.)

An alternative is to work in pairs or groups of three to discuss, plan, draft and revise the contents of all three emails.

- 'Be careful what you wish for because you may get it.' What does this mean, and is it true? Discuss in class the possibilities for characters, themes, settings and events, then write a short fiction story about having a long-term plan in which every step towards ultimate success and victory has been plotted along the way.
- From what you have seen in this episode, discuss in class then write an informative essay-style article on the responsibility and accountability of universities to ensure prospective students are adequately prepared for the courses they wish to pursue. You should consider:
  - » the role tertiary course advisors and student counsellors play, or perhaps should play, in helping students define, reassess and alter their goals and expectations, and whether such professionals should have the right to deny students from pursuing 'unrealistic' aims
  - » whether universities should reassess their selection criteria for accepting full-fee international students in the face of language difficulties and lack of previous academic qualifications.

### COMPETITION AND THE 'REAL WORLD'

We may ask whether the students shown in this episode are not only competing for success against other students for a future outside the campus, but competing with their own inner demons.

- Discuss in class what you consider to be Toby's view of the 'real world', whether this is an adequate or accurate viewpoint, and whether such an attitude is

destructive (including self-destructive) or positive. What is a GPA? (See references.) Is Toby correct in regarding his GPA as relatively unimportant?

- Examine Ale's comments about her guilt sensations in being an international fee-paying student in competition against Australian students. Write two personal letters: one from Ale to a friend or a close relative in Chile, expressing her inner doubts, the other a reply from her friend/relative.
- In pairs carry out research and write a report on the issues surrounding the completion and non-completion (or 'dropout') rate of international fee-paying students such as Tsuyoshi. Use graphs and tables where applicable. Include suggestions and recommendations for the continuance of the current system. (You may also wish to examine the regulations concerning student visas, the reasons they are revoked and whether or not the conditions are too strict.)
- Discuss in class why it is suggested that Tsuyoshi will go home to Japan 'in disgrace'. Plan and write a set of personal diary entries leading up to the day of his departure, as though you were in his position, in which you express your feelings, thoughts and your possible plans for the future.



## EPISODE 4: TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

This episode looks at the personal, familial and wider cultural difficulties international AusAID scholarship holders experience when studying in Australia, particularly for those adults who are returning to academic life after years in the workforce in their own countries.

### AUSAID AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

The two students featured in this episode—Nita Ryarti and Muhammad Arsyad—are both AusAID scholarship holders from Indonesia. What is AusAID, and how does it function?



- Research, discuss in class and then write notes on the general and broad purposes and aims of AusAID. How is it funded, what kinds of activities does it carry out, and how can its success be rated or measured? Do Australians both at home and abroad benefit in any way from the AusAID scheme? Are there any criticisms of the scheme from within or outside Australia? What do the beneficiaries of AusAID in other countries think of the scheme? Is the scheme of benefit only to those countries or regions that have close political and cultural ties and friendships with Australia, or is it a totally non-political scheme?
- As a follow-up to the previous activity, in pairs, research then write in your own words, an informative description of the AusAID scholarship system, outlining the criteria and qualifications prospective students such as Nita and Muhammad would be likely to meet, and the experience they would already have acquired, in fulfilling the requirements for selection into the scheme. Explain why you think Muhammad has had to apply three times before gaining entry. Why does each student want to study in Australia, what are they hoping to achieve and how may their studies be of later use to their home communities?
- Plan and write a short story, told from the viewpoint of an AusAID scholarship applicant, holder or graduate, about his/her experiences. The story may be set before, during or after your Australian experience or set within a combination of any of these time sequences. (You may wish to discuss the possibilities for characters, settings, themes and events in class, and to draw on the real-life personal accounts of former students; see *AusAID* references.)
- In small groups, dramatise in one scene or a sequence of short scenes, any theme developing from your discussions in the previous activity. This will incorporate drafting a play script in which one or more characters may find themselves in conflict with themselves, with others, or with the emotional, social and cultural environment around them. Rehearse, redraft if necessary and present a play reading to your class. (Alternatively, perform the script as staged drama to the class, or devise it as a script for radio, recording it for playback on the college intranet.)
- In personal diary format from the viewpoint of either Nita or Muhammad, present your thoughts, feelings and apprehensions about the western style of higher education you are experiencing at UQ, and the ways in which Australian students learn in class, in comparison to the ways in which you have been educated and trained in your own country. Include comments, if desired, as to whether you feel that Australian lecturers and students understand and appreciate enough of your background and values in coping with classroom socialisation and learning. (You may fictionalise and elaborate from the episode, by constructing particular incidents and observations where appropriate.)
- At the end of the episode Nita says of her semester experience at UQ that it was 'beyond my expectations'. Write a considered appraisal of the ways in which the two students have benefited from their experiences.

### PERSONAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Nita and Muhammad are 'mature-age' AusAID students from widely varying locations and cultural backgrounds in Indonesia—Nita from Jakarta, the large capital city of the country, and Muhammad from a village on the small island of Lombok.

- Does it seem to you that Nita and Muhammad experience similar personal and cultural dislocations and difficulties when studying in Australia? Both married with children, in what ways do you think they are different from each other in terms of cultural and religious backgrounds, traditional attitudes, beliefs and adherence to gender roles? Are these aspects of their makeup likely to affect each student's chances of success in completing their courses at UQ? Is it necessary for each of the students to make personal compromises in adjusting to life in Australia? Do you think the spouses of each student have adequately prepared for their time in Australia?



## SERIES REVIEW

After viewing all four episodes, carry out the following activities.

- Discuss in class and make notes on what you have learnt from the program about the range of academic, social, cultural, emotional, financial and other issues confronting students in tertiary education.
- Plan and write an informative two-page spread for a magazine aimed at a secondary middle-year or senior-level reading audience about what they should expect, and the preparations they should take, in embarking on a course of tertiary education. Using the program's contents as a basis, plus any other resource material you may draw from (including interviews with those who are currently studying full-time at tertiary level), construct the spread. This may be made up of interrelated items of text and image, with headlines and captions as required. The presentation should be in magazine column layout, constructed in desktop publishing software.
- Where are they now? Working in pairs, plan a paragraph commentary description about each of the eleven students featured during the program, showing what you think has become of them five years later. Your commentaries should be consistent and as logical and realistic as possible, based on what you have observed during each episode. Be positive or negative in your comments as you see fit, but also be fair and have reasons for your opinions.

## MEDIA STUDIES

Carry out the following activities.

- In groups, discuss and then write a short analytical commentary on each of the following, providing examples where appropriate:
  - » whether there is a consistency of approach throughout the entire series to the construction of each episode
  - » whether each episode is purely observational, or offers conclusions, solutions and neat endings to issues raised
  - » the purpose of 'fly-on-the wall' filming as distinct from controlled-environment interviews, and the messages these images and sounds intentionally or unintentionally portray to the viewing audience
  - » the role and the nature of the narrative 'voice of God' voice-over (e.g. the commentary accompanying the scenes concerning Toby Latcham and the Australian Prime Minister, in Episode 3)
- Discuss in class and write notes on the possibilities

for a follow-up series and the difficulties in organising it. When would the most appropriate time be for making a sequel—two years, five years, ten years after the filming of *Downunder Grads*? Decide on an appropriate title. What might be the requirements, the issues and themes, the narrative viewpoint, the structure? (For example, would it require another four episodes?) Do you think all eleven subjects, and perhaps their families, would be willing to participate? Would you attempt to bring all students together into one location or visit each of them in their own environments?

- Plan a three-minute preview of the *Downunder Grads* series for a youth-oriented TV program. This will include not only your commentary, but instructions for which scenes you might select for playing during your review. You may wish to videorecord the preview, and to insert edited shots from the series, to be shown with or without your spoken text in voiceover. (An alternative may be to write a preview of 300-400 words for a weekly TV newspaper liftout or magazine.)
- Design and create a promotional poster for *Downunder Grads*, appropriate for display either in a school careers office environment or a public library.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

### BOOKS AND JOURNALS

- Paul Adams, Roger Openshaw & Victoria Trembath (eds), *Score More: Essential Academic Skills for Tertiary Education*, Thomas Learning Australia, South Melbourne, 2007
- Les Andrews, *Does HECS Deter?: Factors Affecting University Participation by Low SES Groups*, DEETYA, Higher Education Division, Canberra, 1999
- Stephen Bailey, *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*, Routledge, London, 2006
- Cedric Cullingford and Stan Gunn (eds), *Globalisation, Education and Culture Shock*, Ashgate, Aldershot, England, 2005
- Focus*, AusAID, Canberra, 1986-present (magazine)
- HECS: Your Questions Answered*, Australian Government Public Service, Canberra, 1989-2003
- Information for Commonwealth Supported Students*, Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2004-present
- Cynthia J. Kim, *Will They Still Pay Up-Front?: An Analysis of the HECS Changes in 1997*, Australian National University, 1997
- John Sharpham and Grant Harman (eds), *Australia's Future Universities*, University of New England Press, Armidale, 1997

Sally A. White, *Understanding Australia: A Guide for International Students*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003

## TV

Sarah Curnow (producer), 'The Degree Factories', edition of *Four Corners*, ABC, June 27, 2005

## WEBSITES

AusAID:

<http://dfat.gov.au/aid/pages/australias-aid-program.aspx>

<http://dfat.gov.au/geo/indonesia/pages/indonesia.aspx/>

Australian Government and higher education: [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/herereport06\\_1.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/herereport06_1.pdf)

*Four Corners*—The Degree Factory (transcript and discussion etc):

[www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2005/s1399343.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2005/s1399343.htm)

Full-fee tertiary education for Australians:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertiary_education_fees_in_Australia)

[Tertiary education fees in Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertiary_education_fees_in_Australia)

HECS/HELP student loans scheme:

[http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/help/payingmyfees/](http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/help/payingmyfees/hecs-help/pages/hecs-help-welcome)

[hecs-help/pages/hecs-help-welcome](http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/help/payingmyfees/hecs-help/pages/hecs-help-welcome)

International fee-paying students (general samples):

<http://www.abc.net.au/newsradio/content/s4219684.htm>

International fee-paying students (University of Queensland):

[www.uq.edu.au/study/index.html?page=10320](http://www.uq.edu.au/study/index.html?page=10320)

<http://www.uqu.com.au/uquinternationalcollective>

Realities of tertiary education:

[www.theage.com.au/news/national/academics-face-axe-at-top-faculty/2007/07/10/1183833519268.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/academics-face-axe-at-top-faculty/2007/07/10/1183833519268.html)

Student unionism:

<https://www.uqu.com.au/>

<http://unistudent.com.au/main/>

Tertiary education - Australian Bureau of Statistics (use search terms such as HECS etc):

<http://www.abs.gov.au/>

What is a GPA?

<http://www.uq.edu.au/myadvisor/index.html?page=2939>

## DOWNUNDER GRADS

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