

The University experience. Was it for me? Is it for you?

Senator Michaela Cash- Introduction

Hi, I'm Senator Michaela Cash, Minister for Employment Skills, Small and Family business. Welcome to National Skills Week 2020. And to this year's podcast series- Journeys to Success -brought to you by SkillsOne. In this podcast series, you'll hear from a number of VET Alumni and Australian training award winners. They will share with you interesting and varied journeys they've taken due to their vocational education and training. Our VET alumni and Australian training award winners come from all walks of life. They have inspirational stories to share about what prompted their learning decisions, their influences, their training and work journey, and why vocational education and training was the right choice for them. This podcast is a great way to learn about the success people have had in their careers and life. There was so much diversity and opportunity that a VET pathway can offer. So enjoy the podcast, be inspired and the best of luck to those who are starting on their VET journey. And if you want more information on where a vocational education and training pathway can take you visit the national careers Institute website @nci.dese.gov.au.

Anne - Host:

Thanks for joining us today. This episode explores the experiences of two people, Cassandra Brown and Daniela Feldman. Cassandra is the 2018 Training Awards vocational student of the year for Tasmania, and also a finalist in the Australian vocation of the year 2018 awards. Daniela comes to us, and she was trainee of the year, 2018, at both the Australian Training Awards and at the Victorian Training Awards. So today, we're exploring Daniela and Cassandra's experience with university and vocational education. We thought it would be really interesting to have a conversation with them about their experiences. And in hindsight, the decisions that they made before. Were they good decisions or bad decisions? And also to provide some insight and advice to people who are considering their study pathways, including talking to the parents and career advisers. So thanks very much for listening and let's get on with the show. I'd like to welcome Cassandra and Daniela. How are you guys?

Cassandra:

Well, thank you.

Daniela:

Good, thank you. How are you?

Anne - Host:

Welcome. I'm really well, thank you. So I suppose, thanks very much for being here. I suppose we've got to start to set the stage on your initial journey for going, and I'd like Daniela to start with yourself. Did you want to give us some information about yourself first? What you studied in uni? And why you started in vocational? Would you like to just give us a little bit of information about yourself first?

Daniela:

Yeah, no problem. So I am in Melbourne currently, and I actually went to a private girls' school for about 13 years. So it was a very long time. My parents and I migrated from

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South Africa and they really wanted to give me the best opportunity for my education, which is great. I really value that, and I'm so thankful that they moved here and gave me the opportunity to learn in that environment. But I found in private schooling, they really, really did push for all of us to go to university. And I guess TAFE and VET Vocational Education wasn't really an option. I mean, they did offer VET during school, but for university or for tertiary education, it wasn't really encouraged.

Daniela:

So I thought, I'd give it a go. I'd just go to university, see what it was like. And I was really interested at the time in nutrition and dietetics. So I studied doing nutrition and dietetics, and I just didn't find it was for me. Obviously, food and healthy eating and a balanced lifestyle is and was something I'm passionate about, but I didn't think it would be you know a lifelong career choice. So I decided I would move across to Melbourne. I actually wanted to do arts, but at the time it was harder to get into arts than science. So I did a science degree. I did, I think it was one or two semesters of that. And I just thought, you know university isn't for me. The learning style, I'm sitting in a lecture with around 300 people, rote learning. And then I had two jobs outside of university as well.

Daniela:

So I found it really difficult to juggle all of those things on top of keeping healthy, having a social life, spending time with my family. It wasn't really suiting my needs, I wasn't really enjoying it. I found learning in that way was quite boring to me, just sitting and rote learning and reading over slides and textbooks and doing research. So I made the decision to drop out of university and I kind of started my VET journey because my mum was mentoring a cadet within the Department of Education in Victoria. And she said, this girl, she's so successful, and she did a traineeship before she did her cadetship. So she said, why don't you have a look at traineeships? It seems like a really great idea. You can actually gain a qualification whilst working and being supported in that environment.

Daniela:

So she did it through a group training organisation in Victoria, and there was actually an opportunity to work in people in culture. So in recruitment and HR at the Department of Premier and Cabinet. And I interviewed at the group training organisation, I interviewed at the Department of Premier and Cabinet and I was successful in gaining a traineeship there. So that's where I did my traineeship and it was a really great experience.

Anne - Host:

That's fantastic. Can I just ask, Daniela, when you're not ... you were saying that you were at university and then you were also working two jobs. Was either of those two jobs in the nutrition and dietetics-

Daniela:

No, they were in hospitality and retail. So they didn't really have anything to do with what I was studying.

Anne - Host:

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Cassandra, so over to you. Your journey is a little bit different. Did you want to just give us a little bit about your journey and the training, your way into vocational education?

Cassandra:

So to start off with, in college I was a bit of a lost soul and didn't know what I was going to do. I ended up dropping out and I had a few different jobs just in the meantime. And then I thought, what am I going to do? I can't pump petrol forever. So I was there was an apprenticeship going at my local motors body shop. And I got an apprenticeship as an automotive spray painter. So I thought, well, I can ... this is my first introduction to vocational education. So I thought I can work and learn at the same time. Thought beauty, let's do that. So I did that and finished my trade. This was in my early 20s and that was great. I took it across interstate, overseas and I found that it was some really good skills. Not only with the actual hands-on tools, but being able to get along with everybody and being an only female in such a male dominated trade.

Cassandra:

So I thought, well, these skills are really good to enable me to get along with everyone basically. And so, tried a few different careers and things as I travelled around the world and came home. I was involved in a big car accident, which forced me to have surgery on my spine. And I ended up having to retrain into something less manual. So I went back to my local registered training organisation, TAFE. I thought that that worked in the past. So had to be an office based, a desk based job. So I went down the line of accounting and that took me through three certificates into an advanced diploma. And now I'm gainfully employed in accounting.

Cassandra:

So early this year, I attempted to go to university. And as soon as COVID hit, I was like, oh, this is a bit stressful. And I just thought, I can't handle all this right now. And I dropped out again. So that was my introduction to uni, but I also found that a lot of the ... although I was only in uni for a short time, I did find that a lot of the content was more of an overview of the entire sector of business, rather than just focusing on the accounting, which is what TAFE was really good for me. And I thought, well, I don't really need a lot of this. It's not applicable, and yeah.

Anne - Host:

Talk to me about that decision, that you're in the VET space to say, well, I need to go to university. Where did that come about?

Cassandra:

so i'm pretty happy in my job and what I do. I feel like I'm pretty important part of the workplace, but my, the firm I work for is all about career progression. And they do encourage you to go to university. And I guess I feel a little bit of pressure to do that and to further my education. And of course I want to learn more, that's just who I am. I'm always looking to learn more and to help me in my role. But I think there's other ways where I can learn that doesn't have the pressure. I think there's short courses, there's all sorts of other tax orientated books and things. Textbooks that I can learn without having

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the pressure of going to university and learning so much stuff and content that's just not even applicable to what I'm going to use.

Anne - Host:

What was different? Can you talk us through that, Cass?

Cassandra:

Yeah. The content that I learned at the vocational education for accounting was of use, absolutely every section of it. It's so relevant at all of the ins and outs of how accounts work, the interest components that everybody uses for loans and things, like all of it. All of it is being used in my job. And there's things like hands on with accounting software, with MYOB. There's things like that that you don't even touch with university, until I think it's year three. So my first accounting job, there was a university graduate. He'd never been to TAFE, one of my colleagues. And he said that I'd come out of TAFE at a cert four level in a better situation than what he had come out of the university bachelor degree. Because I had way more relevant skills and education in what we actually do day-to-day.

Anne - Host:

What you mentioned, and we can't avoid it, COVID. And you mentioned that you started your uni course. I think your life, a lot of people who started the year with a plan and a goal and going, yeah, okay, I'm prepared to try. And then unfortunately, due to what's happening with the pandemic, you've made that decision. But and I know it's hard to say, but if the COVID hadn't happened-

Cassandra:

I still would have dropped out.

Anne - Host:

Right.

Cassandra:

Yeah. I still would have dropped out.

Anne - Host:

And I think that's what it sounds like. I know a lot of people were talking about COVID and it has been ... it's affected everybody. And let's just not deny that.

Cassandra:

Yeah.

Anne - Host:

But yeah, so you would have dropped out anyway.

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Cassandra:

Yeah. Definitely still would have dropped out.

Anne - Host:

I'd like to come back to you, Daniela, in regards to that. And we talk about adversity and we talk about all the amazing things that are happening in our life as it is. I suppose my next thing is that, you dropped out after year one at your dietetics. Can you just talk to me about the people that were with you at university? Were you, was that just you? Was everybody else on that road? Or what was happening with the other people that were doing the course with you?

Daniela:

Yeah. So I found specifically with the nutrition, bachelor of nutrition, that it was quite like my schooling. It was a very small cohort. There was, I think only about 60 or 80 of us. And I went to a very small school and I was kind of looking for something completely different, like a completely different experience to what I had at school. And we were very close knit. It was just our small cohort and we'd do everything together. Two hour lectures, and everyone was on the path to wanting to be a nutritionist or dietician. But a few people did find out after a year that it wasn't for them and they moved on to more broad university degrees, which is what I did. Kind of looking for something a bit different, but when I went to the bachelor of science, I still didn't enjoy it either.

Daniela:

I kind of felt lost, like I said previously. In a big lecture theater with 300 people, I felt the tutors weren't very inspiring. They didn't really want to be there compared to VET, and my experience with VET. And learning whilst working, everyone I work with, they were so passionate about what they were doing. They were experts in their field and they really wanted to disseminate that information and share that information with me, which I found really, really beneficial. And that passion really shone through. Whereas at university, some of my lecturers, some of my tutes, it just seemed like they didn't want to be there. And I was like, well, if you don't want to be here, then why do I want to be here?

Anne - Host:

So for you, when you, before you went into university, what were you envisaging was going to be happening in that space? Can you just briefly describe what you thought was going to be happening? What was in your head?

Daniela:

Yeah, I think the idea that I had of university was like ... it's pretty funny. I thought it was going to be more like an American college situation. Where you make lots of friends and you are really supported and your tutors are very passionate about what they're doing. And the lectures are really fun and energetic and everyone's in a really great mood and very inspired. And what I found at university was, I found it really awkward. It was very difficult to make friends. I don't know if that's because I went to an all girls school for so long. It was just a struggle for me, because I was in such an enclosed environment where

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the teachers really helped us out and spoon fed us. And this is how you do this, and this is how you do well.

Daniela:

And at university, it was really up to me to take control of my learning. And it was such a different kind of learning. There was so much content we had to absorb in such a short period of time. And there wasn't as much direction as there was at school. So it was a bit of a struggle to prioritise what to study, what to learn, compared to school. And I felt a bit alone at university, in this huge campus, not knowing where to go. Sorry. And just fending for myself. So yeah, it was a bit of an eye opening experience to say the least.

Anne - Host:

Yeah. And Cass, what about for you? Before you went into university, what did you think it was going to be like? Or what did you hope it was going to be like, I suppose?

Cassandra:

I hoped it would be similar to TAFE with the teachers being, or the lecturers being really helpful in assisting you with information. But it really wasn't anything like that. I felt like I was just left to fend for myself and there was hardly anyone around to help. My lecturer wasn't necessarily informed in some things, and I just felt a bit overwhelmed to be honest.

Anne - Host:

What was different about vocational education? Do you want to just explore that a little bit for me, in terms of what did you find in regards to that?

Cassandra:

I found the application process was a lot quicker and seamless, easier. The teachers were a lot more accessible. They got to know you as an individual and understood where you're at academically. So they know what stage you're at and whether or not they need to give you extra time with them or things like that. They also helped me in a disability way. They got in sit/stand desks for me, because I was in pain all the time. I'd just come out of surgery. So I just found them really helpful in almost every way. They bent over backwards. When I re-entered the workforce, I was able to switch from classroom into online learning, which was really easy to do. I just felt they were really helpful.

Anne - Host:

And Daniela, for yourself? What was your experience with the vocational education sector?

Daniela:

I felt really supported by my group training organisation. I had two people from my group training organisation coming quite regularly, every four to six weeks, to see how I was doing. How I was enjoying my study, how I was going with that, how I was progressing, and also how I was integrating into my workplace and how I was getting along there as

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well. So I felt really supported compared to university. I felt really cared for, I felt like my needs were being met. And everyone, the college that I did my studies through, the people from the group training organisation, my trainers, and also my supervisors, they really did just want the best for me. And they wanted me to learn as much as possible, so I could kick start my career. I just felt really supported and surrounded by really positive people and passionate people.

Anne - Host:

I just want to add something in that space. Did you struggle? Did either of you struggle in your VET course? Were there periods of time that you were thinking that, actually I'm going to not pass this, or I really can't do this. Did either of you ... I can see, Daniela, that you're nodding your head.

Daniela:

Yeah.

Anne - Host:

Did you experience issues at vocational education?

Daniela:

Yeah, I did struggle a bit. I wouldn't say so much with the actual certificates in business component, but more so with the work. Because I'd never worked in an office environment in a corporate environment. So it was a really big shift, a really big change for me. And it took a long time to integrate into the workplace and really find my feet. I was very shy because everyone around me was subject matter experts. I've been working in HR recruitment for so long, and I couldn't wrap my head around all the acronyms. Working in government, there's like 1,001 acronyms. I was like, what does this stand for? What's going on here? So I think a few months in I was like ... I told my supervisor, I'm like, "I don't know if this is for me. I'm really struggling. It's a completely different environment." I've been used to rushing from uni to working in a cafe to going here, going there.

Daniela:

I was sitting at my desk and it was really a big change. I felt very tired all the time because I was learning and sitting down at a computer. And also a lot of my friends were still at uni and still having however many months off on holidays. And I was sitting here working 40 hours a week while they're off in Europe for the second time this year. So I had a lot of things to kind of grapple with and wrap my head around, but you come out the other end and you just push through. And I'm so glad I did because I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't. But yeah, there's definitely challenges with the university and with VET, but it's definitely something that anyone can overcome.

Anne - Host:

You didn't walk away from the traineeship. What stopped you from walking away? Why did you keep going? What was there? The support there or what happened-

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Daniela:

I guess with the traineeship it's for one year. So I actually, I feel like I need to complete something because I hadn't completed something since I'd finished school. And I was like, I need to do this to prove to myself that I can do something and I can complete a course after finishing school. And my parents supported me, my trainer supported me, my workplace supported me. And yeah over time, you just get used to it. And you think, where am I going to take this? If I finish this, you know this can really impact my life and really kick start my career. But it's good in my VET situation I had that support. I was talking to people, I was talking to my trainers, I was talking to my colleagues at work, and they really supported me through those difficult times. And I think compared to university when I was struggling and I was like, I don't know if this is for me, you don't really have that support.

Anne - Host:

Right. So you just didn't feel that you had that there at uni, but you did at the vocational education?

Daniela:

Correct. Yes.

Anne - Host:

Okay. And Cassandra, for yourself?

Cassandra:

Never. No.

Anne - Host:

Never.

Cassandra:

No. I guess I've gone from being a tradie and then I've gone into accounting. So it was a big shock to me. But with applying yourself on anything, if you want it, you can do it, it doesn't matter. I knew that my teacher would help me through the struggles, and they're accessible via email when you got home delivery, like delivering your course online. But I knew that it was extendable if I needed to, there wasn't those pressures of the deadlines like there is with university. There's, I think, most courses, most of the certificates I did were a year long, but if you needed to, you could extend it to two years. So I knew that of course, I wanted to finish it in a year and I did. I did struggle, but the teachers were always there to give you the extra support if you needed.

Anne - Host:

Right.

Cassandra:

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Yeah.

Anne - Host:

I mean, that's fantastic. Thanks for that, because I think that's a really important aspect. That people constantly talk about the fact that in vocational education that the flexibility, but also the contact with the educators, with the trainers, with people, that they always seem to be in that space. And they have that capacity to mentor and everything like that. So it's great to have that picture at school.

Cassandra:

My teachers were brilliant. If I got one of the assessments incorrect, they would sit down with me and actually teach me where I went wrong, and so that I knew it.

Daniela:

Really good feedback, I think through VET and vocational education.

Anne - Host:

Okay. So we talk about the feedback and we are talking about the fact that the teachers were in there, and they were really trying to help you to succeed. That's where their focus was. I suppose I want to just talk about the parent influence. You know there's a comment, there's research that's out that talks about, 79% of parents want their child to go to university. And there's also some other research out that says only 16% of parents actually understand or have knowledge of vocational education and training pathways. I was wondering if you wanted to give any advice or if you've got people at the moment who are sitting with their parents, also career advisors, or even people who are contemplating, I want to go to university or I don't know what to do. What would your advice be to maybe the parents?

Daniela:

I would say, do your research. I guess university now compared to when parents might've done it, whenever they did it, is very different. So I would definitely say, do a lot of research on university and how university teaches and the kind of assessments that are involved with university, and how long university actually goes for. Will you be employable after a three bachelor degree, or will you have to go on to do further study in a master's and a PhD to actually get a position in the field that you want to work in. And you have to look at how much it will cost. Obviously it's not going to cost out of pocket money, but a three year bachelor's course can cost nearly 30 grand. If you go on to do a masters, some of my friends, their masters cost \$150,000 on top of a 30 grand bachelor's degree debt.

Daniela:

So compared to TAFE, TAFE is a lot cheaper. My traineeship didn't cost me anything. The government paid for my traineeship. My certificate three in business, they actually paid for that. So I was not out of pocket from my traineeship. And I actually learnt ... I had on the job experience. Compared to with university, you don't have that, you don't get that opportunity. The universities don't actually give you work experience. You have to go

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seek that yourself through internships, however else you might find work experience in the field that you're studying in. I'll just say, do your research. And TAFE is a really, really valuable experience and you can be really successful from going to TAFE or going on a VET journey, VET pathway. So I would yeah, research both and just do a pros and cons and see what works best, what might work best for your child. But yeah, do your research, I would say.

Anne - Host:

Great. Cassandra, what would your advice be to parents who are listening?

Cassandra:

Yeah. Look, this is a really long-term ingrained thought pattern that's been around for years and years, long before I was born. That this is the only way, the university. It is so wrong. And it really frustrates me at times because the variants in between them, like Daniela said, the costs. It's just some of these, the VET courses are government subsidised. Two thirds of Australia's skills, sought after skills, are taught through VET. I would say to the parents or to the students that, go with your gut feeling, go with what you're passionate about. Because down the track, you might change again. And that's okay.

Cassandra:

Like it doesn't matter what you do, just do what you want to do right now. And the idea of using VET is that you can quickly change course or change pathway. And a lot of the units that you do learn are interchangeable. You can step sideways if you think, oh, this isn't for me. I actually did an IT course, and then I finished the IT course in the cert two. I jumped into a cert three, and when we started learning something that I thought, no, this isn't for me, I stepped sideways into accounting. And a lot of those units were credits for that course. So I just think, just trust your instincts. And parents, lay off.

Anne - Host:

I mean you know, I suppose also, they're just looking. There is that perceptions versus reality once again, isn't there? And we do. I'm a parent, I've got a daughter who's studying year 12 at the moment. And so, you know our focus is, has always been, hasn't it? And I don't doubt it with everybody. Is that we just want the best thing. And some of those misconceptions are about, oh, well, they'll get a job quicker, that they'll get higher wages, that this will give them security. But as it's actually happened, hasn't it? It says, there's a lot of data out there in regards to, that the graduates on average have a higher medium salary than bachelor's degree. So if we're looking at the idea that 78% of its students actually find employment after graduating compared to 69% of university graduates. And quite often with those university graduates, they actually don't get a job in the field of actually their study. They actually can't find work in that field. And that fact that there's also research that says that two out of three university graduates say their degree didn't prepare them for finding a job in their field.

Anne - Host:

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So when we start to think about this from parents, I mean that's a very strong message. Vocational education can deliver higher salaries, it can actually get you a job quicker. And the scope of work that's available for you, that you're actually not going to inherit any debts because you're actually learning and you're earning at the same time, I love it, in a lot of cases. But there is that impact. I think that's a really positive and a very strong statement I think that we need to make in this. I suppose, what's next? Daniela, what's next for you?

Daniela:

I guess, I just actually started a new position about two weeks ago.

Anne - Host:

Congratulations.

Daniela:

Thank you. I guess I really want to keep learning and growing within the government sector, within the public sector. It's something I'm very passionate about. I really want to be involved with helping the community, assisting with briefs, correspondence, talent acquisition within the public sector. I really want to one day actually be a leader within the public sector, either within Victoria or the Federal government or another jurisdiction within Australia. It's a goal of mine to either be a manager or an executive. I guess networking's really important for me. Through my VET journey, I found that being exposed to different people in different organisations is really great. And showing people that you do have the skills and you are an asset to wherever you're working. And for me, the public sector within Victoria has been really valuable, and people do trust me to get the job done. So I guess keeping on working on my ... to keep on working on my networking and maybe do some further studies. We'll see what happens.

Anne - Host:

And Cassandra, for yourself? What are you thinking of doing next or what's in your future, or that you can see, or that you want?

Cassandra:

I'm pretty settled where I am at the moment. I'm not sure I'm wanting to attempt uni anytime soon, and if ever. And I think I'm going to dig my heels in at work and say, look, I'm happy where I am. I might step sideways, and as Daniela said, do some management because that's always a good skill to have. Just something to keep me educated and moving forward, I guess, with skills.

Anne - Host:

I would probably say that the Generation Z and the Millennials have got a lot to teach people. And the fact that you are more vocal and you're really strong in regards to saying, hang on, let's question what has always been. And I think it's really important that you guys are on that journey to saying, well, hang on, upskilling doesn't mean that you have to go to university, upskilling can occur with vocational education. There's advanced diplomas, there's other components that you can take. And I'm really looking forward to

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seeing the changes that you guys can influence in regards to people's perceptions, because your journeys are so individual.

Anne - Host:

Some are going from university then changing university to do another course. And then coming out of that and then going, no, actually I'm just going to go straight into a traineeship. And Cassandra, going to VET and then moving through that and then making a life changing situation. But then also trying uni and then realising that, hang on, it's not all it's necessarily cracked up to be. And then going back and finding the passion of one that you're really, really comfortable for, I think is really, really important.

Anne - Host:

So I just wanted to say, thank you for you guys, for joining us to share your insights and your thoughts on vocational education and what role that's actually played in your success. I know both of you have gone on to win awards, your training awards in your states. And have then made part of the Australian training awards process, which is just a fantastic credit to both of you. I'd probably like to say at this stage that, if people wanted to get some more information, Daniela, do you have any suggestions that ... where could they go to get some more information?

Daniela:

Yeah. I'd probably suggest having look at the My Skills website. It's a really great website where you can get some overarching information about VET and vocational education and TAFE. I would also say the National Careers website or National Skills website, they've got some really great information there as well. And you can have a look at your local government websites, training awards. There's a lot of information out there, but My Skills and National Skills careers website, they're probably the first point of call I'd go to.

Anne - Host:

I wish you all the best for your journeys. Stay in touch with us and let us know how everything's going. But we'll sign off now. I'd just like to thank the audience. It's been a great story that both of you have told us. So thank you for listening.

Anne - Host:

Thank you very much for joining us for this podcast. We hope that you enjoyed listening. If you want more information on vocational education and training, career pathways and your own way to succeed, check out the National Careers Institute website. You can find them at nci.dese.gov.au. This podcast was an initiative of the Australian government. We look forward to you joining us for another episode in this podcast series. But in the meantime, please stay safe and take care.