

## Take a number and grow with it

**The ENTER score is a measure of neither character nor potential.**

THERE are still some numbers our family members will never forget. When I think of people being only remembered as a series of digits, I think of Cambodia, holocausts and death camps. But these are not the numbers my family have chosen to keep in their recollections. Our extended relatives seem to have memorised all our VCE scores, and still compare our marks with cousins from a decade ago, even when the performance indicators have completely changed. For my relatives who can't read, it's their only way of measuring the value of our 13 years of education.

Even if young people never intended to do tertiary studies, no other number in our young adulthood seems to have as much significance as this one. Our tertiary entrance rank, the ENTER, is often tacitly — and wrongly — considered a combined intelligence test and character evaluation, proof of how hard we've worked, perhaps even evidence of the full brim of our intellectual capacity. Teachers stress how important these results are, and countless VCE tutorials and websites are dedicated to helping us raise these digits.

Sometimes, identification as a number can be an ineffable moment — like when my parents were accepted as humanitarian refugees to Australia. Faces lit with hope, they held up a numbered piece of cardboard for their passport photographs. Once they had arrived, however, the numbers on that piece of card were quickly forgotten. The digits served a purpose and, having served that purpose, were unnecessary in the finite space of selective memory. In the larger picture, these VCE results have about as much significance. A number says very little about people or their circumstances.

Even though VCE students all sat in similar examination halls, they all came from different places and had already been tested in infinite other ways. Perhaps their grandmother died during the year. Maybe they made it through a great national sporting victory that overshadowed any academic result they could achieve. Perhaps they met their first love, and then they broke up. Maybe they became unexpectedly, severely ill.

I know that a number cannot explain the enigma of why all babies love my cousin Jack, nor can it calculate how many nails cousin Shane hammered in during the course of a year of helping to build the family home. It does not note that cousin Linda worked as both a maths instructor and a beautician this year.

All these brave young people went through VCE alongside my sister, Alison. In small and large ways, through their support of each other, they are defying grossly competitive Hobbesian expectations; remembering the things that their parents should never have forgotten — that there is more value in a person's experience than their marks could ever credit them.

From the age of 15, teenagers are asked to seriously determine what they'd like to do with the rest of their lives. This is a ridiculous question — no one at 17 can accurately predict the span of their experience in the next 60 years. Perhaps what should be asked is who they would like to be, something they have slowly been discovering. This discovery is no less important than receiving VCE results. How they handle this day is an affirmation of their character, which cannot be measured by digits because character is forged through experience.

After they receive their results, people will inevitably ask them what they are going to do next. But the students should remember: they are first and foremost human beings, not human doings. And the most important thing for them to be is happy with themselves and the people they have become.

When it comes down to it, success and failure are just temporary feelings and moments. And if people fall below their own expectations, they must trust themselves.

They must not let a number eclipse the immensity of their achievements — they have completed the VCE. This is not the end of their learning, but the beginning.

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