

🎓 Uni or Work? How to Make the Right Next Move (for You)

A practical guide to cutting through the noise
by Dr Jo Winchester

Everyone's got an opinion about your future.

"Uni's a waste of money." "You'll regret not going." "Just get a trade." "Do what you love."

No wonder choosing feels impossible.

This guide helps you look past the noise and make a smart, fact-based decision that fits your goals, values, and lifestyle.

1. There's No One-Size-Fits-All Path

Let's get this straight: success doesn't start in a lecture theatre or a job site. It starts with self-awareness and knowing what kind of learner, worker, and person you are.

Ask yourself:

- ✅ Do I learn best by doing or by thinking and discussing?
- ✅ Am I ready to commit to full-time study, or do I want to earn and learn?
- ✅ What's my long-term goal — a specific profession, or keeping options open?
- ✅ What kind of lifestyle do I want right now — structured or flexible?

👉 The best choice is the one that helps you build skills, confidence, and clarity — not the one that impresses other people.

2. Debunking the Myths

| Myth | The Reality |
|--|--|
| Arts degrees are a waste of money. | <i>Not true. General degrees like Arts, Science, or Business teach critical thinking, communication, and adaptability, the skills most in demand in future workplaces. Graduates from general degrees often find success across multiple industries.</i> |
| Uni debt will ruin your life. | <i>In Australia, HELP debt is income contingent. You only repay when you earn above a threshold (about \$51,000). It's not like credit card debt. Think of it as an investment in yourself, not a trap.</i> |
| If you go straight into work, you'll be stuck there forever. | <i>Wrong. Many people start in the workforce and later upskill, study part-time, or take micro-credentials. Pathways between work and study are now more flexible than ever.</i> |
| You have to know what you want before going to uni. | <i>Nope. Exploration is part of the process. Many degrees let you sample subjects before choosing a major. What matters is staying curious.</i> |
| Only high ATARs get good jobs. | <i>Employers care more about your skills, attitude, and experience than your score. There are also many alternative entry pathways into university.</i> |

👉 The future of work is fluid. Don't let outdated ideas about "the one right path" hold you back.

3. Compare Your Options: Uni vs. Work

| What You'll Gain | Going to University | Going Straight to Work |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Skills | Deep knowledge, research, writing, and critical thinking | <i>Real-world skills, customer experience, teamwork, responsibility</i> |
| Timeframe | 3-4 years full-time | <i>Immediate earning, faster independence</i> |
| Money | HECS-HELP debt (repaid later) | <i>Early income, potential for savings</i> |
| Flexibility | Study load and course choice | <i>Flexibility depends on job type</i> |
| Career Impact | Opens professional fields (law, health, education, design, etc.) | <i>Builds experience and networks; study can come later</i> |
| Personal Growth | Exposure to diverse ideas and people | <i>Hands-on learning, independence, resilience</i> |

👉 There's no "better" column. Only what's right for your current goals. Many young people mix both: part-time study + part-time work! Choose an option that is right for YOU. Not what people think.

3. How to Decide

✅ Step 1: Know your goal.

What kind of work or life do you want in 5 years? (If you don't know yet, choose the option that helps you explore safely.)

✅ Step 2: Talk to people.

Ask current students, apprentices, and workers what their day is really like. Don't just rely on brochures.

✅ Step 3: Map your pathways.

Write down how each option could lead to the other. You'll see it's not a fork in the road. It's a roundabout.

✅ Step 4: Check the facts.

Look at actual job growth data (seek.com.au, National Skills Commission) and graduate outcomes (QILT).

✅ Step 5: Back yourself.

Whichever path you choose, commit to learning, showing up, and staying curious. That's how people succeed, not by guessing perfectly, but by adapting confidently.

Final Thoughts

Your choice isn't forever. It's your first step. You can always pivot, retrain, or start fresh.

What matters most isn't the path, it's your momentum. Keep learning, stay curious, and build a career that fits who you're becoming, not who someone else thinks you should be. Every experience is worth it.

Dr Jo Winchester

Future-Ready Educator

👉 Follow @FutureofWorkwithDrJo for free resources and mentoring for young Australians.