

Hi everyone, and thank you for having me. My name is Hayley Sharpe. I finished Year 13 at Hillcrest High School in 2022, so when you all were Year 8 and 9, I was sitting where you are now.

Thinking back on it, I would've probably been in a very similar situation to many of you - I was very busy, as a head student, chasing scholarships in multiple subjects, trying to maintain a social life and getting involved in all the school activities I knew I'd be doing for the last time. Simultaneously, I was stressed about exams and assessments, trying to keep everything together, and thinking about what my future would hold. I also remember still trying to figure out what I should study and where. Honestly, while I had the basics sorted - work hard, get good grades and it'll all fall into place - there was still a lot going on, and I didn't really know where I was going to end up.

I could have never predicted how life would unfold in getting from there to where I am today. In the end, after receiving scholarship offers from multiple universities, I chose to study at the University of Auckland, opting for what might be considered a rather unfashionable degree - a BSc double-majoring in mathematics and computer science.

That path opened up countless opportunities, from paid trips to Sydney to explore a live trading floor, to volunteering in student organisations, to internships with diverse companies. It also brought many new and enduring friendships with like-minded people, the opportunity to experience hall life, flatting, and living in New Zealand's largest and arguably most diverse and vibrant city.

I've recently started a graduate role as a software engineer at Serato, a Ponsonby-based music production and DJ software company whose tools are used by some of the biggest artists in the industry. You may have heard of some of them - or maybe I'm just outing myself as old now - but Beyonce, Kanye West and Drake are some names that come to mind. I still pinch myself when bands like Linkin Park turn up at the office, as happened the other day, and it makes me reflect on how I got here.

I guess I need to take you back a little bit and share some experiences with you because there were a few misconceptions I had at the time.

I want to start with something that may be a bit unexpected. Your grades definitely do matter, but that's not the whole story. They definitely help you get into the course you want to study at university and can even get you scholarships. But there's other things that matter too - leadership, extracurriculars, and community involvement to name a few.

Here's the thing though - what I didn't realise at the stage you are at, was that beyond this next step, no one is asking you what grade you got in that internal anymore. Other students and lecturers don't ask, and it's not a requirement to share your grades in many job applications. So what DO people care about? People care about HOW you think. They care about how you solve

problems, how you collaborate with others, and whether you'd fit well into a team. These become the vital skills against which you are judged, and which will open up doors for you.

Additionally, diligence becomes even more essential at university than it is at high school. All of us have natural talents, but the university environment inevitably challenges students to move beyond their comfort zones, and at some point, learning becomes demanding for everyone. With the time and workload constraints of a typical university course of study, diligence combined with the ability to prioritise what's important, is the difference between coping and not coping.

In particular, the volume of university work can mean that, despite your best efforts, it is not always possible to complete every task to a consistently high standard. In such situations, priorities must shift. I came to understand that the final 20% of effort can require 80% of the time, and that this additional effort is not always justified if it comes at the expense of other work or life commitments. Although consciously deciding what to prioritise was challenging at times, it ultimately allowed me to manage my workload more effectively and maintain a better balance overall.

So, what lessons have made the biggest difference for me and what advice can I give you?

If you still don't know what you want to do when you leave school, go to careers and take their surveys to figure out your general direction. I cannot recommend this enough. These surveys helped me to choose between a career in design, a career in chemistry and a career in computer science, and I haven't looked back.

Go to university open days. These are awesome for getting answers to your detailed questions, and can also help make you comfortable with taking initiative and talking to adults you don't know. They are so useful. If you can't make it to an open day, get in touch with the university liaison officers. They are super knowledgeable and can save you lots of time when you're trying to find information about a particular uni and its programmes.

Habits. No one is ever motivated all of the time - so having habits in place helps when the motivation drops. As an ex-competitive swimmer, I have always been short on time, so I've always had to plan carefully, be very organised and start things early... despite the temptation that is procrastinating. The sooner you can make proactivity a habit, the better - so start now!

The next lesson is that the people you surround yourself with matter. Look around at your friends - something incredibly valuable is that you are all here because you care about doing well. That environment matters more than you think. Being surrounded by others who put in effort raises your standards without you even noticing. At university, you are constantly surrounded by motivated people who want to do well academically. In Auckland, and in particular at the hall I was in, it seemed like almost everyone had some amazing achievement on their CV. This influenced me profoundly. In this culture of Excellence I wanted to meet the standard around me, and this worked out really well for me. It didn't mean that I didn't have a

life, but it meant that my performance at university didn't suffer, because all my friends also cared about the same balance as myself.

The third thing, which may be surprising advice to some of you, is the importance of being true to who you are and what you want to do. What I mean by this is that it is okay to take the unconventional path. My degree wasn't a typical choice. Most students with a practical interest in mathematics and coding would tend to pursue a professional degree such as software engineering. People might tell you that you will earn more with an engineering degree, or that you will have better job prospects, or even imply that a non professional degree is not as 'smart' of a choice, because it does not have as strict an entrance requirement. However, engineering never felt like quite the right fit for me, so I went to the open days, researched both options, and made an informed decision.

As it turns out, people change their minds all the time. I saw some of my friends completely shift direction after a year or two at university once they discovered options that they didn't even know existed beforehand. I didn't have a clear plan in mind, or know what job I wanted to do, but by following what I genuinely loved, doors opened themselves along the way.

I don't regret following the pathway that I was passionate about. Often, the best opportunities come from being yourself, and doing the best you can at whatever you choose to apply yourself to - and you might just be surprised at how good those opportunities can be.

It's good to be ambitious and to want to achieve, but don't let that become your whole identity. In the long run, the people who go the furthest are balanced and well-rounded. So ask yourself, what defines you other than your academics? What else are you passionate about? How else can you contribute to the world around you? Your future employer will want to know this, so give yourself the time it takes to develop the non-academic side of who you are.

Finally, try to remember that the choices you make this year are the choices that will open just the first door, beyond which there will always be more to make. They are not the be-all-and-end-all choices that will define the rest of your life, even if it might feel that way right now. It's an exciting time, when you can look forward to more freedom than you have ever had, so embrace it and enjoy the process.

So make the most of it. Have a blast, say yes to things, throw yourself into the high school experiences in front of you, and when the time comes, the university ones too. Enjoy the ride, and best of luck!