Enrolling in university is an exciting moment. And then what? Full of hopes, ideals and expectations we embark on an uncertain journey. For some, there is a hazy sense of what we want to achieve. Others have definite goals and ambitions.

Speaking to alumni about why they chose a particular degree, then looking at where they are now, offers a revealing glimpse at the trajectories of life.

Alumni who are involved in the raising of children may have seen career plans take a detour. Focusing on a family’s demands while maintaining participation in the workforce can be a tricky balancing act, especially for women.

Reflecting on how other alumni manage (or managed – hello grandparents!) to combine a career with the complex needs of family life is a poignant reminder that our uncertain journeys continue long after we walk out of the Great Hall, degree in hand. And then what?

Leona Djung (nee Leung) was born in 1975 and educated in Hong Kong before moving to Australia with her family when she was 10. She did her HSC at Turramurra High in 1993 and graduated with a Bachelor of Pharmacy in 1997. She responded to Family Matters’ questions:

Expectations of your degree?
To be honest, I had no idea what I wanted to do. My father had a strong influence on my choice. I thought that I wanted to do something practical and health related; I was full of ideals and I thought my skills could take me to third world countries where I could offer my help.

Where are you now?
I am married and we have a baby girl. We live in Switzerland and I work in Regulatory Affairs, for Roche, a Swiss pharmaceutical company based in Basel. We have been here for nearly four years.

Pivotal points in your career?
After my degree I chose to go into the hospital system rather than retail pharmacy. Subsequently I went for a position in a specialty area, as a renal pharmacist. Certain things in the public sector began to frustrate me and caused me to look elsewhere for opportunity.

How do you balance work and baby?
Thankfully, my company allows flexibility in hours and working arrangements. After Genevieve was born I had eight months off before I was meant to go back to an 80 per cent load; at the last minute, I asked if I could do a 60 per cent load for the first couple of months. On an 80 per cent load I will be working one day from home. I’m lucky because my sister and mother will be coming over to help out during the childcare holidays.

Future plans?
We are unsure about how long we will be in Switzerland. Now that we have a child we need to consider her when we are thinking about where to live and work. We may move back to Australia when Genevieve is old enough to start school.

School Choice
In our Newcastle street of about a dozen children we are the only parents who send their kids to the local school. Other parents have chosen the Catholic school, the nearby low-fee Christian College and other public schools out of our area.
Because we were new to the area when our children were born we didn’t know of the bias against the local school. It was only when my children were at preschool and there was a big chart on the wall asking you to put your child’s name against the school they were to be attending that I realised few other parents were choosing the local school. Why was that?

Outside, the school looks wonderful. Beautiful old timber classrooms with views out to the channel, air-conditioning, spacious grounds, play equipment, a council oval next door for sport, committed teachers, a fantastic principal and a bus route along our street to take the boys to and from school.

Inside, and from our experience, after more than six years, we have nothing but good reports and I feel sorry for the other parents in the street who listened to ill-informed gossip about it not being the “right” school.

Watching them load their kids into the car every morning for that frenzied drop-off has often made me wonder whether they think it’s worth it. But after reading the recently released book *School Choice – How Parents Negotiate the New School Market in Australia* (Allen & Unwin $32.95) I can only think it’s a resounding yes – parents will do anything to secure a place in the school perceived to be the best.

Based on a four-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council and written by Associate Professor Craig Campbell, Dr Helen Proctor and Professor Geoffrey Sherington of the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University, the book is compelling reading.

Overwhelmingly, the focus is on the anxieties, aspirations and strategic planning of parents who want the “right” school for their child.

Included is a table showing the two main reasons given by parents for choosing a secondary school, in Sydney, in 2006. In order these were: the school’s reputation and the proximity to home. At three and four were “academic quality” and “religious reasons.”

Part II analyses interviews conducted with 63 parents or caregivers. The authors “wanted to know what these middle-class urban Australians had actually done and thought about in choosing a school and the degree to which their plans had succeeded or been frustrated.” Some anecdotes are revealing: “Mary and her husband decided on a government school – but not the local comprehensive. Her rejection of this option was based on personal observations, ‘seeing the students’ and reading ‘reports in the paper’.”

Another parent, who chose to send a son to the local comprehensive high school, qualified her choice by saying “I would probably send Ned out-of-area, or even boarding school” if they had lived in a “poorer area.” There are many other startlingly honest quotes from parents, detailing what influenced school choice.

As high school looms in the next couple of years for my oldest son we will soon be discussing the “which high school?” question at the school gate with other parents. Buses for the Christian College and the local high school come down our street and there is now a bus up to Newcastle Grammar School. Options are many. We’ll probably be going over the arguments put forward by the parents in *School Choice* to justify our final decision. SAM

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