Opinion has long been divided on whether a university education provides the right balance between deep and broad knowledge. Richard Burdon Haldane had no doubt about the issue, declaring in 1907 that the mission of universities was nothing less than to ‘redeem’ the young from ‘the danger of contracted views’. Over one hundred years later the same assumptions persist, with administrators describing subjects as having either ‘breadth’ or ‘depth’, or requiring students to take broad liberal studies years.

The effects of these initiatives are unclear. For every graduate who reminisces about the liberating experience of studying outside their chosen field, another complains of time wasted, or worse, feeling patronised.

So what's the solution? How can we gain depth and breadth, without the hazards? The answer might just be staring us right in the face, especially in Australia.

There is already a student-driven mechanism that balances both aims, has a strong history and much future potential: double degrees.

Nearly 40 per cent of students at ANU are enrolled in double degrees. For most students, that means a combination of two bachelor degrees, with perennial favourites being arts and law and engineering and science. For a growing number of students, two masters degrees are also an attractive option.

Completing a double degree means far more than taking one or a small number of introductory subjects outside of a chosen field: it means gaining a deep acquaintance across four or even more fields of study.

ANU is set to expand its double masters options with global universities of international distinction. In this way, students gain access to the best expertise that the world has on offer. In addition, it recognises the increasing mobility of staff and students.

But is ANU getting the most out of the ‘double’ option? I don’t believe so. The higher education sector has been stuck in a rut assuming we can only double up using matching pairs, adding a bachelor to another bachelor, a masters to another masters. Why not mix and match more courageously, put a masters on top of a bachelor degree?

We know many things about double bachelor degrees. We know that they appeal to exceptional students with great school results, and that they have also been associated with more women taking science and engineering degrees. But we also know that some double degree students want clearer pathways to PhD studies, as well as to professional careers. Remember that a traditional double bachelor degree - five years of study - does not qualify you for a PhD or get you into some professions: you still need a higher level qualification. You don't just need breadth and depth: you also need height.

So why can’t you get that in one neat, double degree? Why not combine a bachelor degree and a masters, put them on top of each other, and call it a vertical double degree?

ANU verticals will be the first of their type in Australia, taking this approach across a range of disciplines.

They respect student interest in the breadth and depth provided by doubling up a degree, and the desire to work towards higher qualifications. Moreover, ANU verticals mean students only have to apply to university once, and have the opportunity to start some masters subjects in the final year
of their bachelor degree. This can shave six months off the total completion time, for students keen to get on with the job.

2013 will see the introduction of the first ANU verticals: bachelor and masters degrees that combine politics, philosophy and economics with law, arts with international affairs and Asia-Pacific studies with global studies.

There will be many more as time goes on, and one day not too far away we hope to allow students their own choice of combination. ANU is already moving this way with the bachelor/bachelor double degree, with a new 'flexible double degree' for 2014, allowing students to build their own double degrees from a combination of their choice. The University already provides 137 different double bachelor combinations, with the demand for new combinations increasing every year.

Haldane thought that students had to be shown the way to broader and deeper knowledge. At ANU we believe students can chart the course themselves. Inventing their own combinations will help broaden and deepen their knowledge. Offering bachelor and masters combinations will also help them achieve new heights.

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