Tertiary Choices: Part 2

Elite program gives sports stars a chance to shine

UNSW lets top performers tailor studies to their commitments, writes Joanne Brookfield.

Rising cricket star James McNeil's passion for the sport began as a young boy back in Albury.

"There were a few heated battles with cousins and sisters and all that sort of stuff, the usual Australian backyard tradition: a couple of broken windows and tears were spilt a few times," he recalls.

Inspired by his late father, Les, who he describes as a bit of a sporting legend, James took up football and cricket. "They were the ones I liked and cricketer ended up being the one I loved," he says.

By the time it came to start university in 2009, James was playing cricket at an elite level, which is why he applied to UNSW's elite athletes and performers program.

This program supports students with a flexible entry process (they can receive up to five bonus points on their ATAR for entry into their preferred UNSW program, excluding medicine and flexible study arrangements). To be eligible, students must demonstrate excellence through performing arts, scholastic achievement or leadership on a national or international level.

For batsman McNeil, who is a first grade player for UNSW cricket club and going into his third year of exercise physiology, being accepted into the program "allowed me to concentrate on both things - further my education along with my sporting ability."

Winter Olympian Scott Kneller, who is studying a combined degree in civil engineering and commerce, says: "What drew me to the program was the support they provide for elite athletes, which is unmatched by any other university.

"The program has allowed me to maintain a credit average while travelling on and off for eight months of the year," the professional ski cross skier says from Aspen, where he is competing at his first X Games.

Students complete a form each semester outlining their requirements for flexible study.

"I've attended office at the office of the pro vice-chancellor (students) and registrar, Amanda Snowden, says: "This assists the faculties to know what they are doing and support them appropriately during that semester."

For instance, after Aspen, Kneller is heading to Deer Valley for the world championships then back to Europe to complete the World Cup circuit.

"In late March - four weeks late for uni! - I'll head back to Australia and hit the books," he says.

McNeil says that without the flexibility of the program, life would be a lot tougher.

Although UNSW has supported elite athletes and performers with their study for a number of years, the program began in 2009. Back then, there were 57 applicants and 20 offers were made.

For 2011, this has jumped considerably to 64 applications with 267 offers made.

McNeil, whose aim is to play for NSW, says: "I'd massively recommend it. It's a great opportunity."