

## Submission No 53

### **SUBMISSION TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS PANEL SECRETARIAT: Consultation On The Transparency Of Higher Education Admissions Processes**

27<sup>TH</sup> May 2016

**Contact: Claire Brown, Associate Director, The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning**

The information below was written for *The Conversation* and was published as one article, which can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/atars-you-may-as-well-use-postcodes-for-university-admissions-19154>

#### **PART 1: ATARs – YOU MAY AS WELL USE POSTCODES FOR UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS**

For the next couple of months, young people across Australia will be sitting their final Year 12 examinations. For them, it's the end of more than a decade of schooling looming large. Their soon to be determined Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR) can mean everything – a badge to wear proudly or not, as the case may be. For some universities the results become merely a way of sifting and sorting; who will get in, and who won't.

But the system is breaking: increasingly schools are shaping their teaching towards maximising students' score. And governments and universities alike have become overly focused on the ATAR as a measure of student quality – even though it's more likely to measure the relative wealth of schools, more than a student's abilities.

In fact, using a student's postcode might work just as well.

The ATAR is limited as a sifter and sorter. We need to focus on the potential and calibre of students that universities graduate, not predetermine potential based on skewed "evidence" that denies some the right to enrol.

#### **Curriculum shape shifters**

According to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), there is a growing problem in the way some schools are teaching to the ATAR. This means students end up being short-changed on the range and depth of studies in year 12.

A Victorian education department discussion paper issued in May 2013, *Strengthening Pathways in Senior Secondary Qualifications* stated that:

*In some instances, decisions about a program of study at the senior secondary level are being compromised by an unhealthy and increasingly unnecessary focus on maximising the ATAR...the consequence of this is that individual students then attempt to maximise their ATAR, sometimes at the expense of either enrolling in a wider range of different learning opportunities or pursuing a specialist area of interest and/or excellence (p.3).*

This not only makes the ATAR a problematic measure of a students' potential, but it also undermines a school's ability to prepare students to be successful at university.

### **Limited wealth and a blunt instrument**

Previously, there has been a vigorous debate about whether ATARs should be capped, creating a minimum entry for certain universities and courses. The argument for claims that letting too many students with low ATARs in to Australian universities will “dumb down” the quality of education (<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/carr-suggests-university-vicechancellors-provide-alternative-suggestions-for-savings-20130716-2q2ej>).

But often in these debates, we forget what the ATAR actually measures. It is not a score, it is a ranking. It is not an absolute, nor is it a measure of the potential capability and quality a student can achieve with effective teaching and support during their university studies.

It's an imperfect control measure and certainly not a measure of someone's potential.

Compounding this is the fact that ATAR is tightly correlated to social class and a school system that creates uneven outcomes directly related to wealth.

Students who live in low socio-economic status (SES) areas are pretty much destined to attend schools where subject choice and available resources are often significantly lower than those at higher SES schools. There are few role models to raise students' aspirations. If students do complete year 12, it is likely to be with significantly lower ATARs that restrict the courses and institutions into which they can enrol.

A study from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education explains that:

*...high SES students who were achieving similar grades to low SES students in Year 9 went on to achieve ENTERs [ATARs] around 10 points higher three years later. What's happening is that the schools used by children from poorer backgrounds are becoming more segregated in the sense that the mix of children that they attend school with involve multiple disadvantage. Whereas the schools used by wealthier, more educated parents are becoming more socially selective and more powerful in terms of the resources that they can give to the schooling process* (<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2012/s3571971.htm>).

As a previous OECD report put it:

*...the reality is hard to face: in most OECD countries, students' attainment is typically lower in schools where most of the students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The reasons for this phenomenon are multiple but the primary ones are: students' socio-economic background has a strong impact on their performance; and many disadvantaged schools are unable to counteract its negative impact, and may indeed accentuate it* (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/49478474.pdf>).

To apply a “one-size fits all” ATAR is to adopt a deficit thinking for university admissions. We effectively disenfranchise students for not achieving an ATAR above the cut-off, despite the fact that their socio-economic circumstances mean they cannot compete fairly.

This kind of “input model” of student selection effectively exempts these universities from having to address their own quality issues, effective teaching or student support.

### **Alternatives to entry**

But there are alternatives. Some universities are now looking to more creative and sophisticated ways of assessing the potential of people to succeed. Some courses require additional information such as an interview and/or portfolio, to ensure fairer, more accurate student selection.

Fortunately, many tertiary providers are considering more creative and sophisticated ways of assessing students' potential. Courses like Medicine, Teaching and Fine Arts recognise this and require information additional to ATARs; including interviews and portfolios to ensure fairer, more appropriate student selection.

Other “university readiness” programs are helping high school students become better prepared to enter and succeed at university. One such program is AVID, which supports universities to work with schools in the USA and Australia to undertake whole school improvement in teaching and learning so that students will be better prepared to aspire to, enter and succeed at post-secondary education and the workplace. This improved school-university partnership model helps share the responsibility for preparing lifelong learners and attract a broader cross-section of students to university.

### **Full potential**

The thing to remember here is that equity and quality are not mutually exclusive. As the OECD noted:

The highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality. They give all children opportunities for a good quality education  
<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/49478474.pdf>.

The sector must embrace the potential of students whose relatively low ATAR may actually reflect the accident of their social background or where they went to school, rather than their capabilities and potential.

We have made significant progress to becoming a more inclusive, socially just and knowledge-rich economy. But we need to continue and allow every child the choice of going to university, rather than that choice being determined because of their postcode or circumstances.

## PART 2: ATARS AIN'T ATARS

In 2013, social determinism raised its head again with calls to restrict university entrance to people who achieve an ATAR ranking of 60 or above (<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/carr-suggests-university-vicechancellors-provide-alternative-suggestions-for-savings-20130716-2q2ej.html>). We saw a frenzy of fear that Australian universities will be 'dumbed down' or worse, the infiltration of students who would not traditionally have sought a tertiary education. Better to keep all the horses out in the paddock than "let them run down hill without knowing where they might end up" (<http://theconversation.edu.au/university-standards-at-risk-from-low-performing-school-leavers-5697>).

Subsequent analysis of retention and attrition data, [http://theconversation.com/factcheck-are-university-drop-out-rates-higher-than-ever-16383?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013&utm\\_content=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013+CID\\_210ee60ded9103f7636a7663e4a58fbf&utm\\_source=campaign\\_monitor&utm\\_term=FactCheck%20are%20university%20drop-out%20rates%20higher%20than%20ever](http://theconversation.com/factcheck-are-university-drop-out-rates-higher-than-ever-16383?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013&utm_content=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013+CID_210ee60ded9103f7636a7663e4a58fbf&utm_source=campaign_monitor&utm_term=FactCheck%20are%20university%20drop-out%20rates%20higher%20than%20ever), rankings and graduate course experience data [http://theconversation.com/does-equality-come-at-the-cost-of-quality-in-universities-lets-look-at-the-evidence-16358?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013&utm\\_content=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013+CID\\_210ee60ded9103f7636a7663e4a58fbf&utm\\_source=campaign\\_monitor&utm\\_term=Does%20equality%20come%20at%20the%20cost%20of%20quality%20in%20universities%20Lets%20look%20at%20the%20evidence](http://theconversation.com/does-equality-come-at-the-cost-of-quality-in-universities-lets-look-at-the-evidence-16358?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013&utm_content=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+1+August+2013+CID_210ee60ded9103f7636a7663e4a58fbf&utm_source=campaign_monitor&utm_term=Does%20equality%20come%20at%20the%20cost%20of%20quality%20in%20universities%20Lets%20look%20at%20the%20evidence) and a deeper analysis of entry scores and cut-offs revealed the lack of validity for such claims.

The ATAR is not a score – it is a ranking. It is not an absolute, nor is it a measure of the potential capability and quality a student can achieve with effective teaching and support during their university studies. It was created as a mechanism to rank all students entering the Australian tertiary education system after completing a set of exams in year 12. Tertiary admissions centres use the ATAR to allocate university places in each state. It's an imperfect control measure and not a measure of someone's potential.

A 2011 study commissioned by the Group of Eight from Melbourne University's Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) demonstrated that ATAR is a less reliable predictor of student success for scores in the middle band, since

many students with average or comparatively low senior secondary results also do well once at university.... Year 12 completion, eligibility for a tertiary entrance rank and secondary school performance as reflected in tertiary entrance rank are all correlated with socio-economic status. Given this relationship, selection strategies based solely or predominantly on rank derived from secondary school achievement will work against efforts to promote diversity of participation over time, unless additional steps are taken ([http://www.go8.edu.au/\\_\\_documents/go8-policy-analysis/2011/selection\\_and\\_participation\\_in\\_higher\\_education.pdf](http://www.go8.edu.au/__documents/go8-policy-analysis/2011/selection_and_participation_in_higher_education.pdf)).

Grattan Institute data revealed that almost two-thirds of students with ATARs between 50 and 60 were succeeding. Grattan studies noted the strong correlation between lower ATARs and postcode. As the Grattan Report noted, to cap ATARs at 60 would be to further privilege the socio-economically advantaged at the expense of the disadvantaged (<http://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/195-Keep-the-caps-off.pdf>).

Universities that have broadened their student intake have vigorously defended the growth in numbers of low SES and other so-called disadvantaged groups in tertiary education, citing the economic and social value to Australia from increasing the numbers and diversity of tertiary graduates. Back in 2013, many agree it was too soon to tell what long-term impacts there would be on universities and society more broadly from the additional 190,000 students to access university since the new demand-driven system improved access for people from low SES, Indigenous, rural and remote areas <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/01/labor-capping-student-numbers-gonski>.

If we shift the responsibility for university success back on to an inputs model, accepting only students who are most likely to succeed based on previous educational preparation and a high ATAR upon entry, tertiary institutions are largely exempted from having to address their own quality issues around provision of effective teaching and excellent student support for a wider range of students.

Comments by the deputy vice-chancellor (professional services) at Murdoch University indicated that university would apply a blanket minimum ATAR of 70 in order to “reposition the university in the quality end of the market” (Hare, The Australian, 7th August 2013). This statement presents a uni-dimensional definition of quality and focuses solely on an input model of education delivery.

Are universities that will only take students with an ATAR above 70 saying they don't have the capacity to bring a diverse cross-section of students from across socio-economic boundaries to a reasonable graduate standard after three or four years of study? Or are they implying that students with ATARs at this level are incapable of ever achieving graduate standard, or are not worth the effort? We are fortunate that hospitals haven't adopted a similar approach by determining which patients to accept because of their potential for recovery based on their capacity to pay for follow up care, ensure they have sufficient resources to allow them to rest and recover and their diet and lifestyle choices.

Rather than using an educational input model based on restricting access using ATARs, the sector could consider an output model, that would focus on how a university committed to high quality teaching and excellent support services can realise the potential of incoming students and embrace the opportunity to develop their skills and attributes as a result of their university studies. The emphasis should be on the value-add of a quality educational experience delivered by tertiary institutions at the completion of a course, rather than on what the student doesn't have before they commence.

And what of the substantial proportion of students who come to university through alternative pathways rather than ATAR? Think of what happens when a student receiving an ATAR of 69 misses out on a place at the university with a cut-off at 70. They may go away for a couple of years and then reapply as a mature-aged student. Then the question will be whether enough growth occurred in these intervening years that now makes them an attractive 'risk' to the university, or will admissions officers look again at the 69 ATAR and decide this person will never be successful at this university, whatever life experience they managed to achieve in the mean time?

Equity and quality are not mutually exclusive. It may not be that every individual university can and should be an initial destination for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the University sector as a whole must choose between addressing educational inequality, or exacerbating it. At least some universities should interrogate the quality of their teaching and support to ensure it allows a broad selection of students to enter and be successful by the time of the completion of their studies. By placing an arbitrary cap on ATARs, the sector would be refusing to embrace the potential of students whose relatively low ATAR may actually reflect the accident of their social background, rather than their capabilities and potential.