



The Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into work, further education and training

Education Council

December 2019

Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training.

The Review is one in a series of public consultations that examines Australia's post-secondary education policy infrastructure and the extent to which it draws on the strengths of Australia's education providers and aligns with the interests of students and with Australia's economic and social needs. This includes the recently completed Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework, and the Productivity Commission's currently open review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. The Review of Secondary Pathways has the potential to make a valuable contribution to positive reform of the interface between secondary and post-secondary education in Australia. The Education Council is to be commended for initiating this review.

Both the Discussion Paper and supporting Background Paper released as part of this review are broad in scope, addressing: the level and types of skills students should acquire in senior secondary school; career advice and information on post-school options made available to students; perceptions of different post-secondary pathways including the status gap between higher education and vocational and training; and tailored support for disadvantaged students. The following comments focus on the important issues relating to how learning achievement in senior secondary school is measured and reported.

Measuring and certifying what students have learnt by the end of secondary school is essential to establishing functional pathways into further study or employment. A key challenge is ensuring that the measurement framework captures the diversity of skills and capabilities that students acquire in senior secondary school, and that it has a positive influence over the learning and teaching that occurs. Study Scores and the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) occupy a central position in the current framework for measuring learning achievement in senior secondary schooling. ATAR is a measure of the academic preparedness for entry to university study. Notwithstanding the considerable advantages to the use of ATAR, there is an opportunity to enact reforms that deliver a broader approach to measuring learning outcomes that would reflect a wider set of educational and career aspirations for students.

The recently released *Beyond ATAR* policy paper proposed the introduction of "learner profiles" as a means of representing a wider range of learning outcomes achieved by secondary students, including traditional grades as well as broader capabilities (such as teamwork) that are important to post-school pathways but not always sufficiently reflected in those grades.

The University of Melbourne recommends further explorations of these ideas. We believe that robust learner profiles might complement the existing measures of academic achievement, thus providing a richer information base on which to guide and facilitate the next steps for students.

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Measuring learning attainment

Reliable measurement of learning outcomes in schools is vitally important for student pathways post-school. For university admissions, measures of academic attainment ensure that university entrants have the level of academic preparedness necessary to undertake a program of study, and that applicants can be assessed and prioritised for high demand institutions and courses. The measurement and certification of learning achievement is no less important for the range of other post-school pathways available. Whether school-leavers enter a VET qualification, seek to transition directly into employment, or a combination of options, reliably measuring the skills and knowledge acquired in secondary school is crucial to enabling the pathways available to them.

Across all States and Territories, the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) occupies a prominent position in the framework for measuring learning achievement in senior secondary schools. This is likely to continue given the considerable benefits to the use of the ATAR in measuring learning achievement. For students who receive high ATARs, the ATAR serves as a predictor of whether a student will successfully complete a bachelor degree, and therefore acts as a useful measure of academic preparedness. The ATAR also offers a transparent means for making course offers when demand exceeds the number of places available.

Nonetheless, there are legitimate concerns about what ATAR measures, the ways in which it is used, and misunderstandings about its use. These include the following:

- The ATAR is ‘university-centric’. It is designed to reflect preparedness for university study. It is of less relevance for students who do not take up a university pathway.
- There is greater diversity to university admissions criteria than is apparent due to the over-emphasis on ATAR in schools and in the media. Growing numbers of university-entrants access a place based on criteria other than, or alongside, their ATAR. A recent report found that 60 per cent of undergraduate offers in 2017 were made on a basis other than ATAR.¹
- A student’s ATAR is predominantly determined by academic attainment as measured in Study Scores and does not represent other important skills that are less often tested in senior secondary assessment (e.g. teamwork).
- ATAR has potentially adverse effects on students’ subject selection in situations where students choose subjects that they believe will help maximise their ATAR.
- Because a student’s ATAR is derived from the aggregate performance across a range of subjects, there is a risk that the important information contained in Study Scores is often overlooked.²

In short, while there are considerable benefits in the use of the ATAR as a tool for assessing preparedness for successful university study, there is nonetheless a need to reform the way in which learning is measured and reported in senior secondary schooling. There is an opportunity to shift to a broader approach that complements Study Scores and ATAR by also assessing and reporting on the wider range of capabilities that students have acquired.

¹ Pilcher, Sarah and Kate Torii (2018), *Crunching the Number: Exploring the use and usefulness of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)* (Melbourne: Mitchell Institute), p.v.

² O’Connell, Megan, Sandra Milligan and Tom Bentley (2019), *Beyond ATAR: A Proposal for Change* (Australian Learning Lecture), p.8.

Reform principles

The University of Melbourne proposes a principles-based approach to reforming the framework for measuring learning achievement in secondary school. The following six principles seek to capture the key aims of measuring learning outcomes as well as the challenges associated with performance measurement.

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| Diversity | The measurement framework should reflect the diversity of students in senior secondary school. The pathways undertaken post-school include university entry, VET programs, direct entry to employment, and various combinations of these. Learning achievement should be measured in a way that it facilitates access to the diverse range of pathways by providing education providers and employers with relevant and accessible information on student capabilities. |
| Equity | The measurement framework should be responsive to the needs and interests of disadvantaged students. This includes the roughly one-in-five students who currently do not finish secondary school. The approach to measurement should be designed to encourage curriculum that engages these students and to ensure that their achievements are captured. |
| Comprehensiveness | The measurement framework should account for a wide range of capabilities students have developed during senior secondary school. This includes academic skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy and subject specific knowledge) that have traditionally been the basis for university entry, but also so-called '21 st century skills' such as collaboration, entrepreneurship and creativity. |
| Consistency and comparability | The measurement framework should allow for applicants applying for high demand institutions and courses to be assessed in a way that is transparent, fair and that properly reflects achievements and preparedness. |
| Positive incentives | The measurement framework should create positive incentives. Measurement and certification inevitably play an active role in shaping the learning outcomes achieved in senior secondary schools. The way in which achievement is measured influences curriculum development and delivery, as well as what students choose to study in senior secondary schooling and the ways in which they prepare for assessment. The measurement framework should be designed with a view to exerting positive influence over the teaching and learning that occurs in secondary school. |
| Efficiency | The measurement framework should be efficient. This means minimising costs to Government, schools and tertiary education providers in administering and using the framework, and minimising the time and effort invested by students and their parents in applying for entry to tertiary education courses and providing transparent and easy to understand information for employers. |

Reform proposal – Learner profiles

The recently released *Beyond ATAR* policy paper – published by the Australian Learning Lecture and co-authored by researchers at the University of Melbourne and RMIT University – proposes a set of reforms to the interface between senior secondary school and post-secondary education in

Australia. The University of Melbourne recommends exploration of the potential of the introduction of 'learner profiles' for senior secondary students.

The learner profile proposal draws from certification frameworks already in place in other countries. A learner profile is a standard format for recording a student's achievements in senior secondary school. The profile would include the formal grades received for the units a student has taken, but also a statement of the broader capabilities that are often inadequately reflected in those grades, as well as extra-curricular activities the student has engaged in. Importantly, the learner profile would be a "living document" that is, in part, authored by students themselves. This will allow students to "chart their learning and development, indicating growth over time,"³ encourage them to identify more strongly with their learning achievement and help them to foster a better understanding of the career options open to them.

While the authors of the *Beyond ATAR* report envisage learner profiles as an alternative to the use of ATAR, the University of Melbourne suggests that this approach would complement ATAR rather than replacing it. A student's ATAR could be incorporated into his or her learner profile, underscoring that this represents one indicator among others of that student's achievements and capabilities.

The introduction of learner profiles promises considerable benefits. First and foremost, learner profiles could provide a fuller picture of the skills and knowledge a student has acquired by the time they finish secondary school. This would protect the advantages of the ATAR while helping to overcome some of its limitations by recognising a wider range of student achievement, thus better aligning with the reform principles. More specifically, the potential benefits include the following:

- The richer set of indicators included in a learner profile might better accord with the range of post-secondary pathways available to school leavers, better emphasising how their learning in school aligns with potential career options.
- Learner profiles could highlight student excellence in particular domains that are partly masked by the ATAR derived from an aggregate of a number of subjects.
- Learner profiles may encourage senior secondary students to select subjects on the basis of their interests and career aspirations, more confident that educational and employer pathways post-school would recognise the learner profile in selection into those varied pathways.
- Learner profiles may help to increase student retention by better engaging the estimated one-in-five students who currently do not complete secondary school. At-risk students would have a clearer view of their own learning achievements and how they support post-secondary pathways.

As noted, learner profiles have been adopted in other countries. There is an opportunity to develop a learner profile model appropriate to the Australian context, with input from a range of stakeholders including students, representatives from secondary schools, postsecondary education providers, employers, Governments and the research community.

Recommendation

The University of Melbourne recommends the nation-wide adoption of learner profiles, complementing the ATAR, as a standard format for representing the learning outcomes achieved in senior secondary school.

³ *Beyond ATAR*, p.17.