

Bypass the ATAR: why do we uphold a system that harms young people?



By Peter Hutton

Community contribution / November 12, 2024

Every year, a quarter of a million Australian students find themselves overwhelmed by the high-stakes pressure of Year 12 exams - an outdated system that promises to “define their future,” but at what cost?



If you're not confident in achieving an ATAR of at least 80, you're better off without one. Once assigned an ATAR, students are typically required to use it, sidelining other valuable entry pathways.

For two years, teachers focus solely on exam preparation, students sacrifice sleep for late-night cramming, and a booming market of professional tutors caters to families who can afford them.

This singular focus has now filtered down with elements replicated even within the upper primary years. This cycle breeds anxiety, stress, and a misconception that exam success will shape one's entire life.

Mounting evidence shows that the ATAR system is increasingly irrelevant for university entry with less than 20 per cent of all new Undergraduates relying on their ATAR for entry. It's time to reconsider the ATAR's dominance in our education system.

The ATAR's unfair design

The ATAR is not designed for the success of the majority; its primary function is to rank students, creating winners and losers in an unfair system.

Despite being in use for over 15 years, Australia stands as an outlier, the only jurisdiction among 251 countries and territories that uses percentile rankings to compare students directly.

When comparison overrides competence

Look closely, and you'll see that the ATAR is not a score - it's a rank. Even students taking dramatically different subjects are compared under the same ranking.

The ATAR's structure mandates that some students must be at the bottom to allow others to be at the top. This raises an important question: when only 40 per cent of students move directly into university, and only 60 per cent of that 40 per cent rely exclusively on their ATAR. Why must all Year 12 students participate in a game to generate a ranking used by less than one in four of them?

The hidden cost

In 2020, over 25,000 voices supported my petition calling for the ATAR to be suspended due to its harmful impact on mental health, especially exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. The relentless pressure of Year 12 exams seeps into family life and strains the wellbeing of students.

As a parent, I felt like I lost my kids to the stress of Year 12 exams. For three years, their evenings were consumed with endless studying - a sacrifice that should never be a necessary part of growing up.

Research from Professor Viviana Wuthrich of Macquarie University found that 31 per cent of students showed signs of severe stress, and 26 per cent displayed symptoms of severe depression.

Why do we uphold a system that harms one in four young people?

The ATAR's impact on self-worth

The rankings' effect on students' confidence can last for decades. Students with an ATAR of less than 70 often internalise a damaging belief: that they are inherently inferior, unworthy of a university education, or foolish for pursuing professional aspirations.

This pervasive mindset chips away at self-esteem long after the exams are over, in spite of the many alternate pathways to tertiary study open to them.

An illusion of accuracy

The ATAR's numerical precision is not as reliable as it appears. Due to rounding errors in subject score calculations, even the second digit of an ATAR is likely to be incorrect more often than not.

A score of 74.55 is actually more likely to be 73.XX or 75.XX. While admission authorities defend this practice due to the randomness of the errors, the implications are serious: the ATAR's illusion of fine-grained accuracy is a myth.

Privilege and disadvantage: the ATAR's bias

A young person in the top wealth quartile is over seven times more likely to achieve a 90+ ATAR compared to someone from a low-income background.

This stark statistic shows that the ATAR system perpetuates privilege, favouring students with access to tutoring, more resourced home environments, and other resources.

Meanwhile, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who may already face significant barriers, find themselves further disadvantaged by a system stacked against them.

Trading interests for scores

Education should be an empowering journey where students pursue their passions and shape their futures. Yet, the ATAR system encourages students to prioritise scaled scores over authentic learning.

Many choose subjects not out of interest or relevance to their career but because they scale higher for the ATAR. Even students with clear goals in science, engineering, or the arts must excel in English.

Why must students be bound to express literary flare and understanding that goes well beyond the ability to express oneself confidently in English, when it doesn't align with their ambitions?

Choose a pathway that values you

To put it bluntly, if you're not confident in achieving an ATAR of at least 80, you're better off without one. Once assigned an ATAR, students are typically required to use it, sidelining other valuable entry pathways.

Instead of cramming for exams that may not reflect your true interests or potential, consider bypassing the ATAR altogether. Prioritise your health and happiness and focus on what matters most for your future.

Redefining success: options beyond ATAR

It's time to challenge the ATAR's place as the primary university admission route. Schools and education providers should highlight alternative pathways like direct university entry, TAFE certifications, diploma-level courses, hands-on work experiences, and other learning opportunities that align with students' passions and strengths.

Let's embrace non-ranked vocational pathways and non-scored subject which offer flexibility whilst also allowing students to demonstrate their competence.

This exam season, I urge education providers and policymakers to reimagine tertiary entry. Let's champion transparency, wellbeing, and genuine learning opportunities that do not hinge on a ranking system.

Let's create a future where students are empowered to thrive beyond the limitations of the ATAR.