

## No scandal in ATAR's growing irrelevance

The growing irrelevance of the ATAR in a demand funded system is driving debate about the use of ATARs to measure suitability for higher education. There is nothing like loss of purpose to focus attention at superficial charms.

The problem for those who argue the scandal of the diminishing ATAR of entrants is five fold:

1. an endeavour to define the academic skills required for higher education is better done against the existing criterion based data on school leaver academic capability than on a ranking;
2. in all but a few courses higher education is no longer a rare commodity that requires careful rationing;
3. the focus on the individual is divorced from consideration of the educational achievement of the cohort, and hence of those who will work and live in Australia (or elsewhere);
4. assumptions that higher education is only for the particularly bright are challenged by the complex interplay of people from various backgrounds and capabilities with various forms of post school education and training and subsequent employment; and
5. the hubris of presuming that those who gained a degree some decades ago were the intellectual elite of the time, far more capable than current entrants to university.

### **1. Create an objective measure of capability where a threshold is wanted**

That the ATAR is a rank is constantly re-iterated. It was created to ration places, on the assumption that places should be allocated based on perceived capability.

When universities can take as many students as their staff, facilities and judgement of suitability permit the question of rationing reduces. Where a university wishes to delimit suitability for a course, or all courses, it makes more sense to focus on the evidence of each person's achievement against a defined level of knowledge and capability, not how the applicant stands compared with the next person.

The ATAR is created off the back of State year 12 assessment systems, each of which begins with the actual achievement of school students. Those assessments provide the basis for an objective, criterion based entry decision for universities such as Murdoch and UNSW wishing to define a minimum level of achievement for school leaver entry.

The announced review of the Queensland Overall Position system is the first opportunity to think through the presentation of school leaver achievements consistent with current and future tertiary education needs.

### **2. Scarcity and exclusiveness**

A rank based minimum threshold acts against the logic of Government policy dating back some decades, that Australians should be encouraged to gain education skills and knowledge to underpin a successful work career. The policy assumes all people are capable of learning. This has driven a complete transformation in education attainment from 1981 when only 24% of those 15 and over had a post school qualification with the majority of the workforce relying on minimum school outcomes (year 10, if not lower)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Table 19, *Census of Population and Housing-30 June 1981*, Australia, ABS Catalogue No. 2443.0, 1983

In the 1980s, Governments pushed year 12 completion from around 35% to 72%. This transformation both widened the level of academic capability attempting year 12 and ensured greater take up by people from all backgrounds. Schools had to adapt.

The 1990s saw great growth in both higher education and VET, as it became the norm to have a post school qualification, rather than the exception. The Bradley target of 40% of those 25-34 with a bachelor degree is a further manifestation of this direction.

The current focus on improving schools is another. Should this succeed it will produce even more year 12 students with a strong basis for university education, while continuing with the ATAR would still distribute them from 99.95 downwards. The future student at the 30% should be stronger than the current student with the same rank. If it lifts completion rates in currently low attainment areas it will lower the ATAR for students in high completion areas.

### ***3. The collective educational capacity***

Debate tends to dwell on individuals. The Government's responsibility is to assess the educational capability of all of us, and seek to encourage its development, at least to the level required for employment and effective living.

If we only educate the academically most able at the point of entry no doubt the group is quite select and of high capability but overall education skills and knowledge remain low, for example, if we educate 10% but leave 90% in ignorance. If we educate 100% the overall level is much higher. We can even take a moderate position and look to educate say 40%. If we do it well there is no reason the 10% learn less than they would otherwise. Even being hard edged and allow that the 10% get to 95% of the individual outcome they would achieve if we focussed solely on them, the overall learning gain across the whole group is still substantially higher.

It costs to expand educational opportunity. That is why education has always started with the rich plus the most capable subset of the rest. As need pushes and societal wealth increases education is then pushed out to all, initially basic writing and maths, then full primary, early secondary, now year 12 and increasingly a post year 12 qualification. The evidence is clear. Given the right circumstances all people are capable of further learning.

### ***4. The mix of higher education, VET, and year 12 certificate***

The traditional paradigm positions those with a university degree ahead in educational capability from those with VET qualifications, particularly a trades qualification, and also ahead of those who rely on their year 12 certificate.

An argument sometimes raised is that growing higher education provision is keeping people from useful vocational qualifications. Putting aside the snobbery that says those from districts where higher education is rare ought to continue the pattern through a focus on VET, there is a more serious question: should higher education qualifications target those with the higher levels of educational potential with VET qualifications for those who follow or is the current mix more useful?

It has never been the case that all school leavers with a high ATAR have applied for university. Even in the 90+ ATAR band some do not; between 70 and 90 it has been more sizeable. At least a quarter of growth has come from more people with those ATARs applying to higher education. Is this pushing trades further down the educational levels? At a time when many trades are becoming more complex not less that would not seem good, nor is it plausible.

The changing nature of university students would suggest that there is even more overlap in the educational potential of those undertaking VET as those completing higher education. This challenges assumptions about who undertakes university study.

And the demand is not slackening – hence it appears the study is considered of value. The comparison may not be with the traditional image of a university graduate job, but the true comparison should be with what roles individuals would have without a degree. If there were good prospects for large numbers with year 10 outcomes only the numbers continuing at school and pushing for VET and higher education qualifications would be much smaller. It is the nature of current employment that means a degree, and the development in capability those individuals gain, is essential for many people.

### ***5. Hubris of past graduates***

Nearly all those commenting on the development of higher education have a degree. Most of us gained that first degree some decades ago. Implicit in much of the commentary is an assumption that the standard of entry and learning in those degrees was particularly high, and threatened by current standards.

I have not seen a study that compares either entry or exit levels of achievement several decades apart. There are various reports of hindsight assessments that today's students are not a match for those of periods past. If taken as a historical linked series it shows that the academicians of Archaic Greece were a capable intellect indeed. However these reports are not evidence but opinion.

My memory is different. In the ACT in the late 1970s very high proportions, 80% or more, of school students moved from year 10 in high school to year 11 at a secondary college. I had a taste of what became common from the 1990s of schooling being for everyone. The range was considerable, and the schools worked with this.

It was then easy to enter the local ACT university if you completed year 11 and 12 with sufficient tertiary focussed studies. Most did that, although only a subset immediately looked to go to university. However over time I suspect my cohort easily achieved 40%. At university there was a breadth of potential standards covering the range of marks from pass to high distinction, and a breadth of students' work to match. The common factor was some interest in the topic of study, and the desire to improve individual knowledge and capability.

I don't think the ACT cohorts of my time were particularly outstanding; they just lived in a society that presumed educational participation. I struggle to see why that opportunity should not be there across all regions of Australia.

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