

Senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training

IRU submission

The Review of pathways from senior secondary education to future education and employment posits the need to disrupt the current disjuncture between school and all that follows. It seeks to make that transition clearer as a general systemic outcome and better suited to each individual.

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) supports the goal of the review. In [Towards a Tertiary Future](#) the IRU argues that young Australians need to complete school. They then need further qualifications and a means to access discrete, targeted sets of skills and knowledge as their future employment requires. Most are doing just this.

The problem

The year 12 certificate is the harshest point in the education system. The acquisition of education is mostly an experience of flow – where learning is gained and the person moves to another layer. The early school years highlights this with students moving from the preparatory year through primary to secondary schooling, with few challenges to that progress.

The Senior Secondary Certificate not just confirms that the school process is complete, it is used to determine initial access to subsequent education. It has the strongest sense of determining a person's future for a long period of any educational outcome even though the reality of employment and income data would suggest it is the subsequent tertiary qualification that matters much more.

While in reality most people gain entry to the tertiary course they desire this is perceived as hard to achieve. It puts great stress not on completing year 12 but how well relative to other students a person does. This emphasis is so strong that the system has lost focus on demonstrating the actual achievement in favour of the relative.

IRU proposals

In this submission the IRU focusses at the Skills section of the Review's discussion paper to advocate:

1. targeting the primacy of the learning that the school group as a whole achieves as fundamental to then ensuring effective transition to work and further education;
2. being explicit about the level of learning and skill development each person has achieved so that further education can build off and improve it; and
3. making more of the senior secondary certificates, to ensure they provide a clear basis for further education. The Certificates are strangely ignored in the current debate, as illustrated by the few references in the discussion paper, in favour of debate about the ATAR.

1. The learning achieved

How well students emerge from schools is important. When students reach essential thresholds of knowledge and capability they are better positioned to build on those foundations with university and other tertiary providers.

The recent PISA results highlight that the learning outcomes in schools are under pressure.

Clearly the better prepared students are through school the more able they are to engage with higher levels of knowledge and skills. If a gap emerges between the reality of school outcomes and the expectations for entry to follow on education it hampers students' ability to engage well with further education and could put at risk their achieving the outcomes needed to complete later qualifications.

How to improve the level of student outcomes in schools is not an issue that the IRU addresses here. There is some tension across the core academic skills and the social and interactive skills also needed. The relevant concern for universities, other educators and employers, is that they know what those outcomes are to then align to the delivery of their courses.

They need this information both at the general level of the range that the cohort of students should achieve, and the specific information about a given student.

2. Stating clearly what the individual is capable of

It is a strange reality that the presentation of information in the senior secondary certificates disguises information about the person's level of knowledge, capability and skill in favour of normalized information. It assumes that the overall level of learning is similar year to year. Only NSW appears to provide year 11 and 12 assessment outcomes as objective statements of learning outcomes.

If the PISA decline in important skill areas is real the results year to year over the past decade for the year 12 cohort should also have declined. Yet this does not show in the senior secondary results, let alone in the ranking based on them (ATAR), since those results are adjusted to ensure a similar distribution year to year.

The presentation of results should be transparent about the actual level of achievement.

3. Using the senior secondary certificates

In a world where almost everyone needs to build in their school achievement with further education the senior secondary certificates should encapsulate the information each person needs, in a way that is useful across the breath of tertiary education options and for employers considering school leavers.

The certificates should be the launch pad into adult education and employment.

With information presented on the learnings of the individual selection for subsequent education could more easily be based directly on whether a person has the minimum level of capability to undertake a course.

Many if not most university courses consider applicants to ensure that are likely to be capable of completing the course. Most applicants who can demonstrate that they are, are offered a place, with over half receiving an offer for their preferred course¹.

Some courses cannot admit all who are capable of doing them. The ATAR is an effective means to select among those who are suitable when only some can be successful. It is based on the assumption that the higher your entry point academic capability the greater reason to admit you. This is generally accepted rationing mechanism although alternatives are possible.

To contain the ATAR to its relevant use requires:

- a stronger focus on the senior secondary results, reworked to be absolute statements about current level of achievement; and
- entry to most tertiary qualifications to be based on thresholds required for the course, not relative standing to other applicants.

Other factors beyond the review's remit affect this, notably the willingness of Governments to support each young person access the education courses relevant to them. At this period of a temporary lull in demand the opportunity exists to put the emphasis back to suitability for a course as demonstrated through transparently presented school learning outcomes.

6 December 2019

¹ Reported in the annual *Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances* report, prior to the 2019 report