

IRU discussion paper

Year 12 outcomes and university selection under COVID

COVID-19 has forced each of Australia's school systems to teach most students from home for much of term 1. There has been much concern about the impact on students' year 11 and 12 studies and for the transition to post school study, especially in university.¹

With the COVID-19 environment under control it is likely most schools will be back in practice during term 2 and for the rest of the year. Further COVID-19 outbreaks could change this, at least for schools in affected areas.

The IRU has consistently argued that all Australians need to complete school and then progress to tertiary education that suits their aspirations and capabilities. Our response to COVID-19 must support each person to do to ensure the best spring back from COVID-19.

The challenge is not how to assess year 12 in 2020 or how to create an ATAR. The challenge is how to ensure the education each person receives meets expectations for year 12, without any set of students suffering greater disruption than the group as a whole.

1. Structure and assessment of year 12

There are eight different school systems across Australia, one for each State and Territory. Each organises the structure and assessment of the year 12 certificate(s) differently. The assessment varies from completely school based in incremental term-based units in the ACT to systems with a strong focus on end of year 12 exams.

Each of those systems works. Students complete them and go onto the same broad range of future education and careers. There is no right way to structure and assess year 12.

In response to COVID-19 each system is adjusting its approach with the intent that there is a clear known year 12 outcome for all students in 2020. Changes need not weaken or undermine the outcome.

Key point

There are multiple ways to assess year 12. Changes in 2020 should not be a cause for worry.

2. Ranking year 12 outcomes

Universities with the assistance of the relevant State and Territory authorities have long ranked the year 12 results to provide a simple means to decide which students receive offers for high demand university qualifications.

¹ See: Mitchell Institute (2020) [Impact of learning from home on educational outcomes for disadvantaged children](#)

To support interstate applications a common system of ranking was agreed in the early 2000s which subsequently became the Australian Tertiary Academic Ranking or ATAR.

The ATAR takes the year 12 outcomes for a State and allocates students across one of 2,000 rankings from 99.95 downwards. ACT results are worked into the NSW ATAR and the NT results worked in with the SA ATAR.

This is done every year in each State without problem using the different ways of assessing, scoring and scaling. That the very different NSW and ACT year 12 systems can combine to produce a common ATAR shows how independent of the year 12 study the ATAR is.

There are around 45 students at a ranking point in NSW and many fewer in the smaller States. This shows how fine grained the ranks purport to be. It could be reflective of year 12 outcomes. It is hardly reflective of future learning potential, aspiration and need.

Key point

An ATAR can be calculated for any set of year 12 outcomes.

3. The impact on learning

The real issue with COVID-19's impact on year 12 2020 is the fundamental questions of what students learn, their readiness for further study and training, and whether some students are disadvantaged.

Universities need to know whether there is any change in the likely knowledge and capability of students that could require change to commencing student units of study.

The response to COVID-19 offers the opportunity to set out the learning outcomes for year 12 more publicly than has been standard.

The IRU has argued over the past year that the level of public information about year 12 learning outcomes is not strong and variable by state and territory. The public focus is too much upon students' ranking, their performance relative to other students in their year, than on the learning the students as individuals and as a group achieve.

The big question for 2020 is whether the learning outcome overall is lower due to the disruption? Will students have developed in other ways through adjusting to the home-based learning and other changes that the outcomes remain a good outcome?

The various State and Territory authorities will be alert to this and ensuring the minimum negative impact possible.

Key point

State and Territory education authorities should take the opportunity in 2020 to restore focus on the level of learning students achieve.

4. Impact for students

There is much concern some sets of students are more likely to be disadvantaged. The focus so far is on those seeking to be towards the top of their cohort and students least able to study at home due to lack of necessary tools and study environment.

Studies of students with similar ATARs show that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups tend to do slightly better when at university.² The ATAR may show the correct difference in year 12 achievement but that is not tightly predictive of how those students will then perform. The regressive impact of COVID-19 on low socioeconomic students and schools weakens how well the ATAR can predict university performance for these students in 2021, and possibly longer term due to impacts on Year 11 and younger students.

The recent Victoria University study highlights the risks from home based online learning for school students from disadvantaged backgrounds which included students from low socioeconomic communities, rural and remote communities, indigenous communities and those with a disability.

High ATAR achievers

All universities have some qualifications that require very high rankings for an offer; some universities have many such qualifications. For students aspiring to those qualifications a small change in ranking could be significant.

- The most academically inclined students are likely to adjust and keep going with little impact. It will be the specific loss of access to some classroom resources that is most likely to affect them.
- Students whose school environment strongly supports academic performance may slip more than the norm due to home-based study away from school scrutiny.

The result could be that that the leading students for 2020 reflect the breadth of schools more than normal.

Universities will need to consider whether the implied precision of the ATAR in each of its 2000 bands can be sustained for 2020. While a rank of 80.15 is likely distinct from one of 89.35 2020 may force us to consider whether the distinction between 90.05 and 90.25 has any useful meaning. A simple response to this would be to pull back to 100 ranks or twenty, to compare an 87 with an 88 or an 85 to a 90, treating all at a band equally. It could be called overall position.

More radically accepting that all above a given rank are more than capable could then lead to a random selection from them – where numbers need be limited.

Mid to high ATAR outcomes

Offers for many university qualifications will be made to all applicants with a mid to high level ATAR. The emphasis is on accepting not selecting. Changes in ATAR outcome for students interested in these courses matter much less. The real issue is that their year 12 learning is at the level expected of them.

² See: Li and Dockery (2015) [Does School Socio-economic Status Influence University Outcomes?](#) *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 18, issue 1, 75-94

A government committed to renewing Australia's economic and social strength will ensure that there is a suitable place for all these students.

Students at the margin of completing year 12

The most at risk group is students who are marginally attached to school. It is possible that the difficulties of home-based study will cause some to cease study. They will r withdraw from year 12 or not achieve the minimum level outcomes required to gain the year 12 certificate.

School systems may need additional investment to ensure they can identify and support all students at risk of falling out of education.

Key points

The most academically inclined students are likely to adjust with little impact and be well prepared for tertiary study.

Distinctions between narrow upper ATAR bands for admission into selective courses may not be valid indicators of underlying ability or future capability.

Students who are marginally attached to school are at greatest risk of being underprepared for tertiary study in 2021 and likely longer term as mature age students.

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