Assessing the ATAR

Exploring the use of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)

The Mitchell Institute, Victoria University
December 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

The Mitchell Institute at Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/Yugarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

About the Mitchell Institute

Established in 2013, the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University is a leading policy think tank and research centre. With a focus on education policy, systems and place, we are working towards a fairer and more productive society where every individual, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to thrive.

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Contents

This report casts fresh light on the transition from school to tertiary education in Australia, with implications for policymakers, system leaders, schools, students and their families.

Director's foreword

Of all the thousands of different assessment results young people receive during school, the ATAR is one of the most prominent.

The ATAR was designed as a selection tool for admission into tertiary studies, providing tertiary institutions a way to sort and rank applicants.

Often interpreted as a marker of intelligence, diligence and capability, the ATAR's influence extends beyond the admissions process. It shapes ideas of what success in schooling looks like, which pathways are valued, and how students, families and schools measure achievement.

The development and use of the ATAR was particularly important when there were caps on the number of undergraduate places available at universities.

Over the past 20 years however, the number of places available has grown, and so has the variety of pathway options into tertiary education. This has meant that the ATAR's role as a sorting tool has weakened.

Despite these shifts, the ATAR still looms large in Australia's education ecosystem.

The Mitchell Institute wanted to examine the use of the ATAR in a world where more young Australians are transitioning from school to higher education.

What we found was that the use of the ATAR varied enormously depending on the state, the field of study and the university. In many instances, it wasn't even considered by universities when making admissions.

The ATAR undoubtedly still dominates admissions processes in some contexts, but it is no longer the backbone of the system it once was – now, it is just one of the many ways that people can gain entry to a higher education course.

This report casts fresh light on the transition from school to tertiary education in Australia, with implications for policymakers, system leaders, schools, students and their families.

We hope it can cut through some of the noise, confusion and misconceptions surrounding the ATAR, provide clarity on the role it plays in our education system currently, and offer some direction for the future.

Professor Peter Hurley
Director, Mitchell Institute,
Victoria University

Overview

To Australian secondary school students, the ATAR looms large – a rank, a passport, a marker of success. But how relevant is it? And does it matter more to schools or universities?

Anyone currently undertaking senior secondary schooling in Australia (and their families) would be familiar with the acronym ATAR - referring to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank.

While often misunderstood as a 'mark' out of a potential 100, it is in fact a ranking from 0 to 99.95 representing a student's relative position compared to their peers.

For some students, it is a welcome signal of high achievement and a passport to new opportunities; for others, it is a cause of anxiety or disillusionment or simply irrelevant to their chosen path.

Existing nationally in its current form since 2009, the ATAR was established to assist tertiary institutions (primarily universities) to 'sort' students for selection and admission to high demand courses. Yet it has grown a life of its own beyond this role, existing now as a measure of both secondary school achievement as well as a tool for admission to tertiary education.

Reflecting on the ATAR's intended purpose, our analysis asks, for whom is it working well, or not so well? Is its use changing over time? And what are the implications for meeting our national education policy objectives?

To senior secondary school students, teachers and families it may feel as though the ATAR dominates (or at least underpins) every discussion and decision. It can seem as if that one number is critical to future opportunities and pathways. However, our analysis finds the reality is much more nuanced.

There is, in fact, a great deal of variation and diversity in the proportion of Australian senior secondary students opting to receive an ATAR, and the extent to which ATARs are used in tertiary admissions.

The bottom line: three in ten school leavers moving on to university are now admitted without reference to an ATAR.

This insight provides clarity, and perhaps for some, hope, that they are not defined by 'one number'. However, it also raises many questions - about how to work to achieve our national objectives in education, how we approach national consistency in a federation, and how to manage the growth and maturing of our evolving tertiary system. It also raises even bigger questions - about how to balance fairness, efficiency, equity and opportunity.

Key findings

ATAR and schooling

In 2024, across Australia, 64% of Year 12 students received an ATAR.

The proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR varies greatly across the states and territories, from 79% in New South Wales to 38% in Western Australia.

The proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR is trending down in Western Australia and Victoria (2019-2024). The only state where there has been an increase during this time is South Australia.

ATAR and tertiary admission

In 2023, there were 230,234 domestic students commencing a bachelor's degree (honours or pass) across Australia's universities. Of these, around half, or 115,889, had recently completed secondary education (school leaver cohort).

In 2023, among this school leaver cohort:

- 63% were admitted to their bachelor's degree course on the basis of ATAR alone
- 7% were admitted on ATAR plus additional criteria
- 30% were admitted solely on the basis of other (non-ATAR) criteria.

There is great variation across the 39 universities in the proportion of domestic undergraduate students admitted on the basis of ATAR, from almost 100% at one institution to around 10% at another.

Victorian-based students have the highest rate of admission based solely on ATAR; Tasmanian-based students have the lowest.

Key findings

ATAR and tertiary admission

A greater proportion of high socioeconomic status students are admitted to university on the basis of ATAR only (67%) compared to low socioeconomic status students (55%).

The proportion of males admitted to a university course solely on the basis of ATAR is 65%, slightly higher than the proportion of females (61%).

The Group of Eight Universities are the most ATAR reliant when admitting recent school leavers (76% of school leaver cohort admissions based solely on ATAR, rising to 88% when the use of ATAR combined with other criteria is included). Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities are not far behind, with 73% of school leaver cohort admissions ATAR only.

Universities in the Regional Universities Network (RUN) are the least reliant on ATAR, with only 37% of school leaver cohort admissions based solely on ATAR.

Courses in Engineering and Related Technologies and Natural and Physical Sciences have the highest proportion of ATAR only admissions (72%).

Courses in Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies (43%), Education (42%) and Creative Arts (41%) have the highest proportion of admissions based on other (non-ATAR) criteria.

The ATAR and national policy priorities

The insights in this report tell us much about the diversity of approaches to senior secondary schooling in our federal system and the maturing of our higher education sector beyond a 'one size fits all' approach. But where to from here?

The ATAR has both supporters and detractors. Some stakeholders are invested in its continued relevance, while others champion its decline, or even abolition.

Rather than redraw existing battlelines in this debate, this report aims to provide a data-rich, fresh perspective. We seek to place these insights in the context of our national policy priorities, and question whether the ATAR is helping or hindering efforts to achieve these shared goals.

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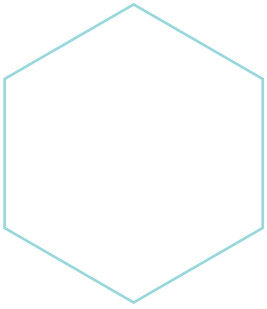


Need to increase tertiary participation and attainment

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2024) recommended the Australian Government set ambitious targets for the nation's post school education levels. It recommended that by 2050, Australia achieve an 80% tertiary attainment rate for the working age population and lift the proportion of university educated Australians aged 25-34 from 45% to 55%.

The Albanese Government has signalled its broad support for this policy direction, yet there continues to be debate about the funding of tertiary education, particularly higher education. There are strong views on how much of the cost should be borne by students and by the taxpayer, and how finite public resources should be allocated across institutions and disciplines.

Need for the education ecosystem to support a range of pathways to meet skills needs

The global economy young people are entering is constantly being reshaped. The knowledge, skills, and capabilities in demand continue to evolve, as does technology, including major disruptors such as artificial intelligence (Joyce, 2019).

According to Jobs and Skills Australia projections for the next decade, employment growth will be split between occupations related to a bachelor's degree pathway (51% of projected employment growth) and those associated with vocational education and training (VET) pathways (42.6%).

Need to improve equity across all education systems

Australia has one of the most unequal school education systems in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the inequality entrenched in our early childhood education and school systems flows on into tertiary pathways and institutions.

Despite the substantial expansion in participation in higher education with the introduction of the 'demand driven system' in 2010 – a policy designed to increase the access of underrepresented groups – the level of participation among these groups remains far lower than for people who do not come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Productivity Commission, 2019).

The proportion of students attending university from low-SES backgrounds has barely increased over the last decade. In 2008, about 15% of all undergraduates were low-SES; by 2022 this had risen only to 17% (Morris, 2024).

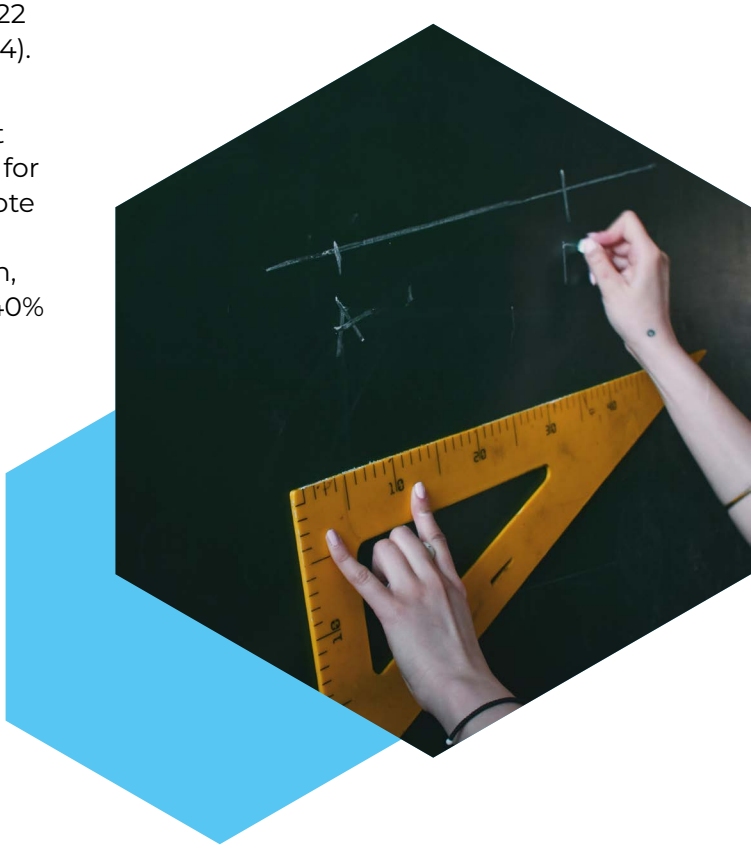
The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report (2023) concluded that 'higher education participation rates for low-SES and regional, rural, and remote students have gone backwards since 2016', while First Nations participation, though improving 'remains around 40% below population parity' (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023).

Persistent structural barriers continue to limit access and success in higher education for some students.

Location remains a major determinant: students from regional and remote areas face restricted subject offerings, fewer local tertiary options, and the high costs of relocation and accommodation (Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

Family background is equally influential – young people whose parents did not attend university are significantly less likely to aspire to, apply for, or complete higher education (OECD, 2021).

Financial barriers have also grown. The *Job-Ready Graduates* package introduced in 2021 increased student contribution rates for many courses, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, shifting a greater share of costs onto students.



What is the ATAR?

While the ATAR's primary purpose has always been to facilitate tertiary admission, particularly to universities, it has also come to play a significant role as a 'mark' of overall senior secondary achievement. So, what is this ranking and how is it derived?

Despite its 'national' status, the process of calculating the ATAR remains strongly grounded in state and territory level entities and processes.

The ATAR is a percentile rank between 0 and 99.95 given to a student to indicate their position relative to peers in their state or territory. This means that if a student receives an ATAR of 65.25, the student achieved higher than 65.25% of their age group in their state or territory.

However, 'peers' in this case is not limited to the cohort of students who receive an ATAR, but all students in the relevant age group; as a result, the median ATAR is generally around 70, with some variation across states and territories.

The ATAR in its current form was introduced in 2009 by the then Minister for Education Julia Gillard. It was designed to unify the university entrance system across the country where previously each state and territory had its own individual system, including the Universities Admissions Index (UAI) in New South Wales and ACT, the Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) in South Australia, Northern Territory, Western Australia and Tasmania, and the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) in Victoria. Queensland kept its Overall Position (OP) system as its primary tertiary entrance pathway until 2020.

The ATAR rank is derived from an aggregate score, which is reached by adding up a student's 'scaled' scores for each subject. This scaling adjusts for the fact that it is more difficult to obtain a high study score in some studies than others. The rationale for scaling is not that some studies are inherently harder or easier, but that some studies attract a more competitive cohort of students.

This scaling process results in individual subject scores being adjusted up or down based on an agreed formula. This formula is calculated differently in each state and territory and is applied by the respective tertiary admissions centres in each jurisdiction. However, the resulting ATARs are then recognised as equivalent across jurisdictions.

Australian Tertiary Admissions Centres

New South Wales and ACT – Universities Admissions Centre (UAC)

Victoria – Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC)

Western Australia – Tertiary Institutions Service Centre (TISC)

Queensland – Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC)

Tasmania - (University of Tasmania*)

South Australia and Northern Territory – South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC)

* Tasmania is an exception, as with only one university in the state, the university deals with admissions independently.

The ATAR and schooling

We cannot understand the context in which the ATAR sits without first understanding the complex policy and funding framework underpinning schooling in Australia. There is, in fact, not one school system, but many.

Schooling in a federal system

Schooling in Australia is divided into the stages of primary education (Foundation to Year 6) and secondary education (Years 7–12). School attendance is compulsory until at least Year 10, with students required to be in education, training, or employment until they turn 17.

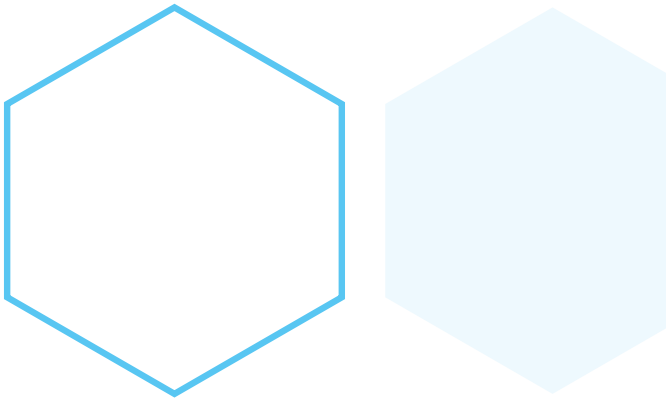
School funding in Australia is complex but designed to ensure all students are funded to receive a quality education, allowing for factors such as school type, student needs and location.

Australia's school system includes government (public) schools, majority funded by the state/territory and federal governments, and non-government (private) schools, including Catholic and independent schools, that charge fees but also receive government funding, predominantly from the federal government.

Government schools in Australia are administered by state and territory governments, and on average, they contribute 75-80% of total funding while the federal government contributes the rest. This funding supports essential services such as teaching and non-teaching salaries, classroom resources, special education programs, and school maintenance and infrastructure.

The Australian Curriculum, overseen by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), sets national achievement standards and objectives of schooling while allowing states and territories to tailor content to local needs.

The high-level subject areas set out in the Australian Curriculum are incorporated into individual curricula in each state and territory. Each one has a curriculum authority, responsible for designing and maintaining Foundation to Year 10 and senior secondary courses, incorporating the Australian Curriculum and their own assessments and certifications.



School retention

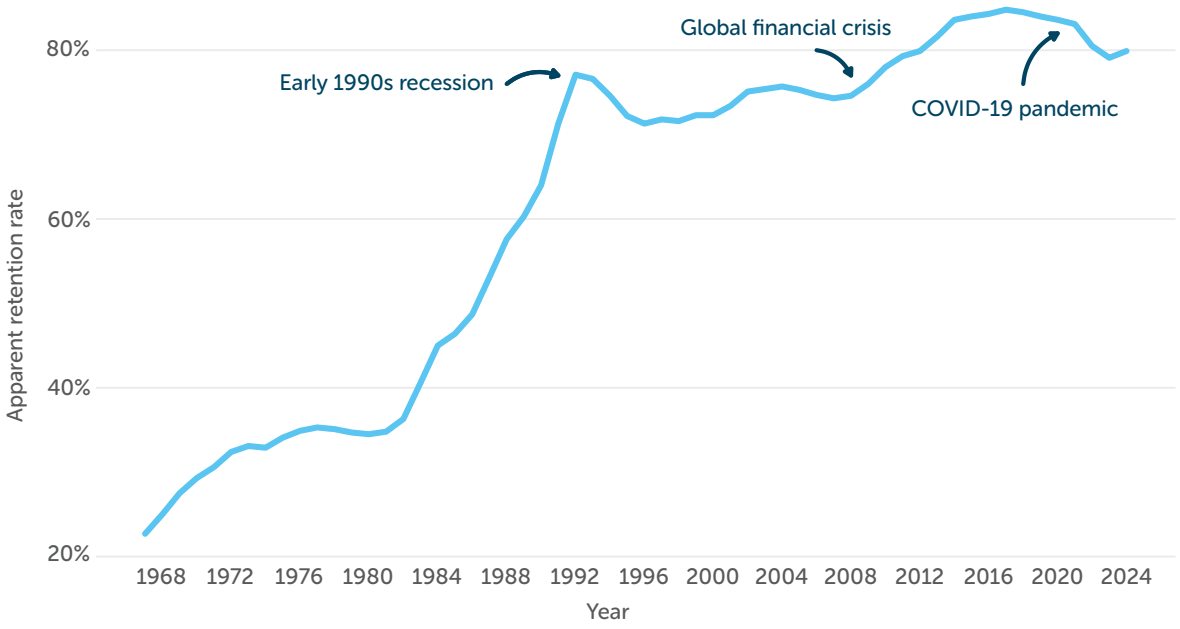
Over the past half a century the proportion of young people in Australia completing school has more than trebled, increasing from just over one in five completing in 1967 to one in five dropping out in 2024.

As Figure 1 shows, there were steady increases in apparent retention rates from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, due to a growing economy and rising social aspirations. A shift in the industry structure with the decline of manufacturing and growth in the services sectors required a stronger economic reliance on secondary school qualifications (Teese & Polesel, 2003). During the 1970s, employment growth slowed alongside apparent retention rates.

The 1980s saw the most dramatic increase in retention, initially prompted by the 1982-83 recession and falling teenage employment, reaching a peak in 1992 following further economic recession. The introduction of government-funded living allowances for students and the expansion of school curriculum to accommodate a broader range of students were other contributing factors.

After a strong rise in the 1980s, Australian school retention has stabilised

Figure 1: Apparent Retention Rates, Australia, 1967-2024 (%)



Source: ABS (2024). Apparent retention rates are derived by dividing the total number of full-time Year 12 students in a given year by the number of full-time students in Year 7 five years prior.

This period of rapid growth in school retention came to an end in the early 1990s, after which rates began to fall. But by the turn of the century, retention rates were increasing once again, accelerating after the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) to eventually peak pre-COVID-19 in 2018 at 85%. The most recent year of 2024 saw a minor rise to 80%, the first increase since the pandemic.

Girls are more likely to complete school than boys, with apparent retention rates of 84% and 77% respectively in 2024 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2024). Furthermore, young people from low-SES backgrounds, those from rural and remote areas and Indigenous young people are less likely to complete Year 12 (Lamb et al., 2020).

While a number of factors impact on the demand for secondary school completion, the decline in the availability of full-time employment, along with the changing industry structure, has meant that many more jobs require young people to finish school or to continue into post-school education and training.

Post school destinations

After completing a senior secondary certificate young people take a wide range of pathways post school. While there are well established links and pathways into higher education, other options include apprenticeships, vocational training and full-time employment.

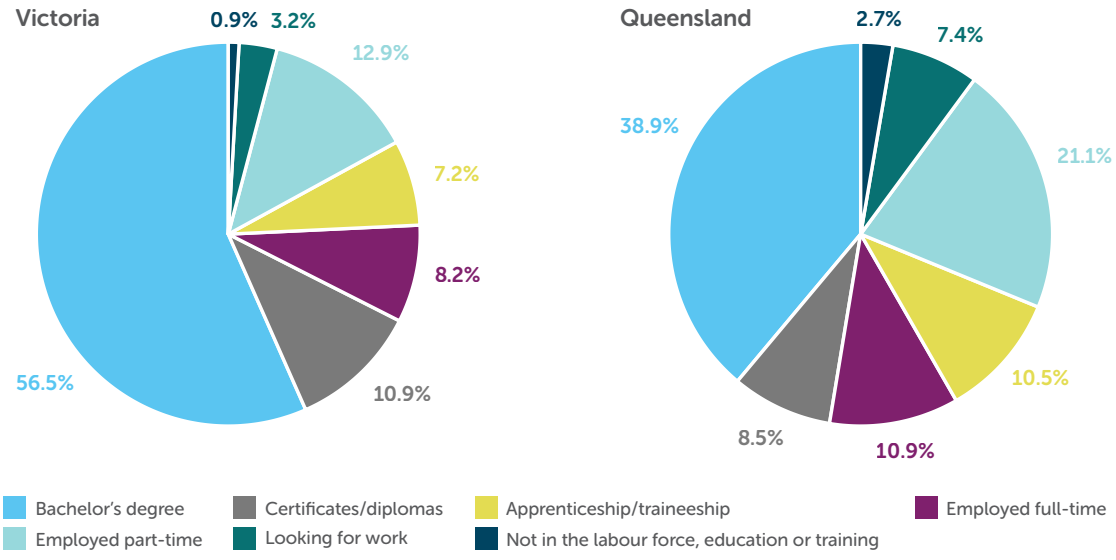
This picture of post school pathways looks very different across the states and territories. We can get a sense of this by examining the destinations of school certificate completers about six months after finishing school.

For example, in Victoria, 57% of young people who had completed a senior secondary certificate in 2023 were enrolled in a bachelor's degree six months later, and nearly 20% were completing an apprenticeship or VET qualification.

By contrast, in Queensland, 39% of those who had completed a school certificate in 2023 were enrolled in a bachelor's degree six months later, and 32% were employed full or part-time.

Students take diverse pathways after finishing Year 12

Figure 2: Post-school destinations six months after finishing Year 12 in 2023 (%)



Source: Queensland Department of Education (2024); Victorian Department of Education (2024)

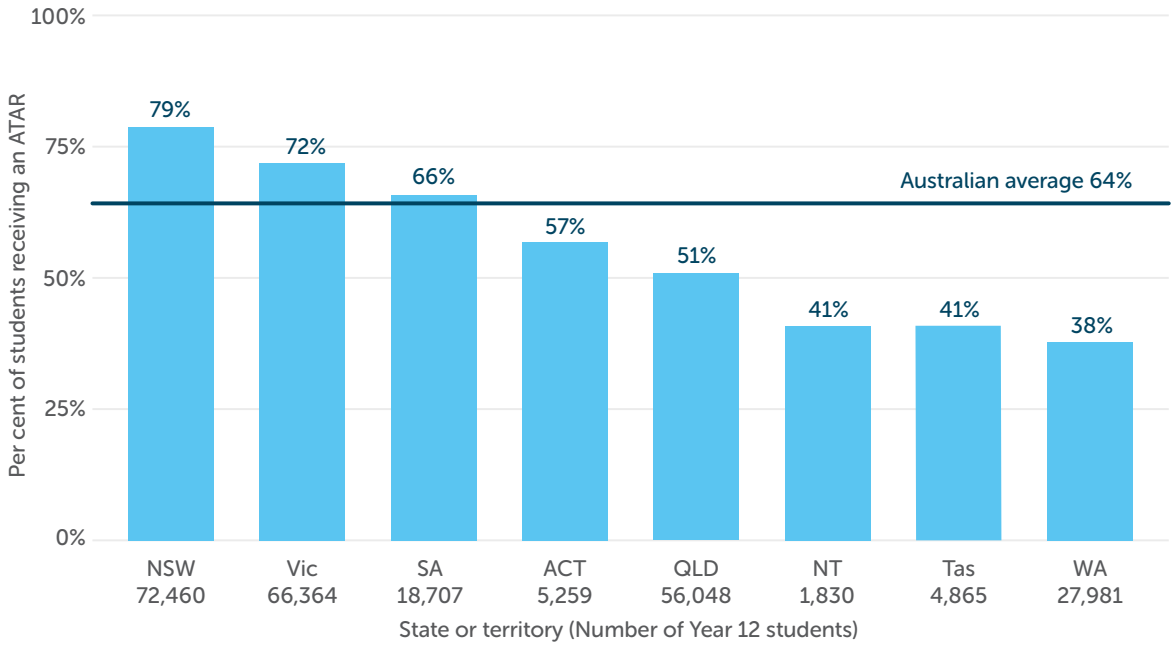
Variation in the proportion of students receiving an ATAR

While it may feel like there is a national consistency to the ATAR system, there is significant variation in the proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR around the country.

In 2024, the share of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR ranged from 79% in New South Wales to 38% in Western Australia.

The percentage of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR varies by state and territory

Figure 3: Proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR by state and territory, 2024 (%)[1]



Sources:
1. Number of Year 12 students: ABS (2024)
2. Number of students receiving an ATAR in each jurisdiction: ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (ACT BSSS) (2025a); Northern Territory Department of Education and Training (NT DET) (2025a); NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) (2025a); Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) (2025); School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) (2024); South Australian Certificate of Education Board (SACE Board) (2024); Tasmanian Assessment Standards and Certification (TASC) (2025a); Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) (2024)

[1] The proportion of students receiving an ATAR given in Figures 3 and 4 is derived by dividing the number of students receiving an ATAR (published by the relevant state or territory authority) by the number of Year 12 full-time and part-time students (published by the ABS, based on the national school census conducted annually in August). These figures may vary from other publications deriving rates based on other measures e.g. numbers of senior secondary completers.

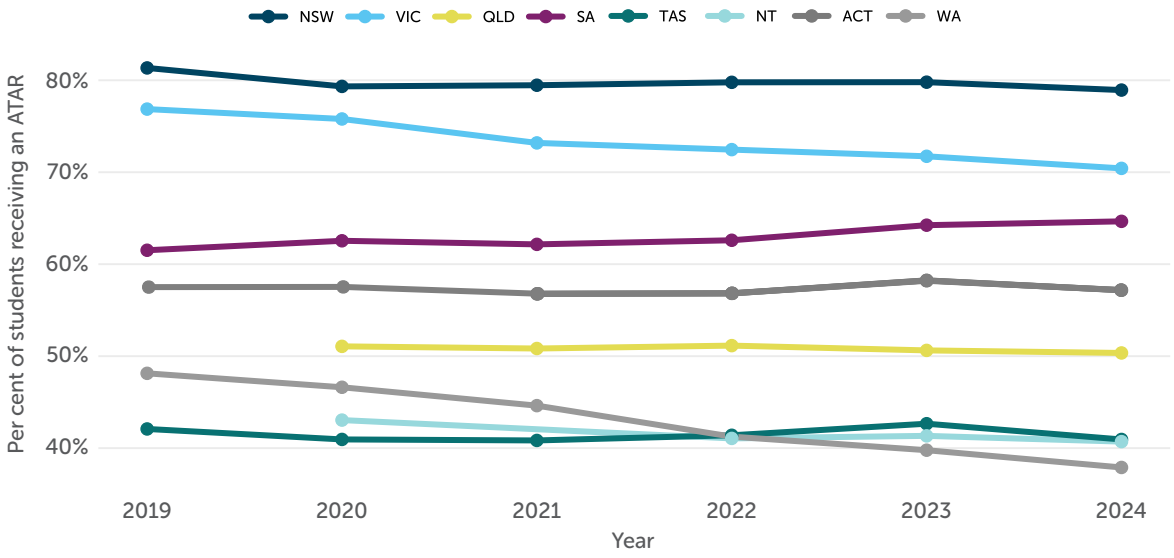
Take up of ATAR consistent over time across most states and territories

In most states and territories, the proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR remained steady between 2019 and 2024, while South Australia is alone in seeing an increase in the use of the ATAR pathway across this period (5 percentage point increase).

Conversely, students in Western Australia and Victoria are moving away from the ATAR, with declines of 21 percentage points and 8 percentage points respectively since 2019.

ATAR use increasing in South Australia, declining in Western Australia and Victoria

Figure 4: Proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR by state and territory, 2019-2024 (%)



Note: Data unavailable in 2019 and 2021 for NT. Qld commenced ATAR in 2020.

Sources:
1. Number of Year 12 students: ABS (2024)
2. Number of students receiving an ATAR in each jurisdiction: ACT BSSS (2025a, 2025b); NESA (2023, 2024, 2025a, 2025b); Northern Territory Department of Education (NT DoE) (2021, 2023); NT DET (2024, 2025a); QTAC (2021, 2022, 2023, 2024b, 2025); SACE Board (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024); SCSA (2020, 2022, 2024); TASC (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025a); VTAC (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024)

During this period young people have faced significant disruptions to schooling due to the COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021.

Many jurisdictions have undertaken policy reviews into senior secondary programs and pathways in recent years (Firth, 2020; Louden, 2024), and reforms to senior secondary certifications have followed in some states, such as the introduction of the VCE Vocational Major (VM) in Victoria. Students undertaking VCE VM are not eligible to receive an ATAR (State Government of Victoria, 2024).

The ATAR and tertiary admission

For Australian students who have completed their senior school certificate, there are well established pathways into higher education, with ATAR as a conduit. However, even for these students, the ATAR is not as determinative as we may be led to believe.

The reality is that three in ten Australian school leaver domestic undergraduate university offers are made on a basis other than ATAR.

University admission in Australia – the numbers

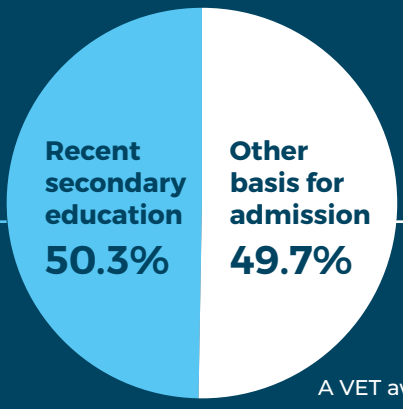
In 2023 there were 230,234 domestic students commencing bachelor's degrees (honours or pass) across Australia's universities.

Of these, around half, or 115,889, had recently completed secondary education, and as such can be taken as the 'school-leaver cohort' transitioning from Year 12 to university post-school.

Around half of all domestic, commencing bachelor's degree students are recent school leavers

In 2023 there were a total of 230,234 domestic students commencing in a bachelor's degree

Of these 115,889 or 50.3% were admitted on the basis of recent secondary education



The remaining 49.7% were admitted on another basis

Other basis for admission includes:

A higher education award course

A VET award, enabling or bridging course

An enabling or bridging course delivered by a higher education provider (complete or incomplete)

Work and life experience

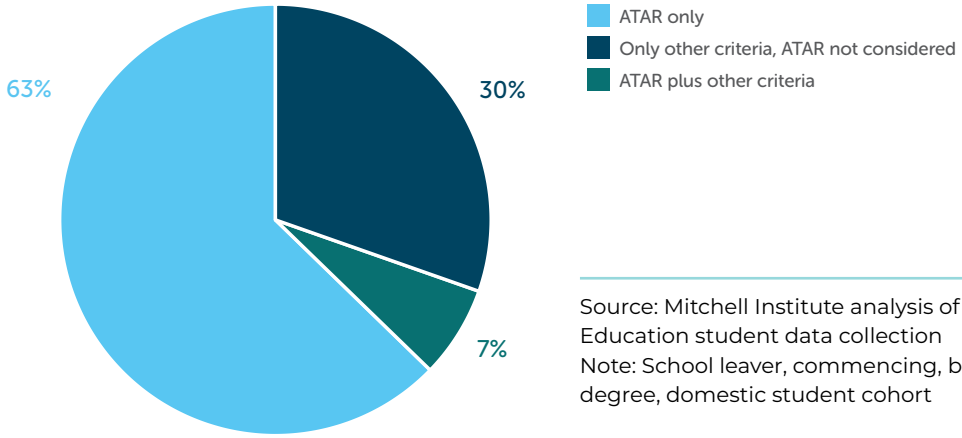
For **the non-school leaver group** – domestic students commencing bachelor's degrees who are not recent school leavers – admissions were made using a range of criteria, including higher education award courses, VET award courses, enabling or bridging programs delivered by a higher education provider (complete or incomplete), or work and life experience. ATAR is not a relevant consideration for this group.

Conversely, for **the school leaver group** – ATAR is highly applicable. However, this does not mean that admission to Australian universities for school leavers is exclusively based on their ATAR.

In 2023, just 63% of the school leaver cohort were admitted into their bachelor's degree course on the basis of their ATAR alone. A further 7% were admitted using their ATAR plus additional criteria, while 30% were admitted solely on the basis of other (non-ATAR) criteria.

Three in ten school leaver admissions made without reference to ATAR

Figure 5: School leaver commencing cohort, basis for admission, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Basis for admission

For recent secondary school leavers, the main assessment pathway used by the university in making an offer of admission to a course is categorised in three ways:

1. **ATAR only** – regardless of whether this includes the consideration of adjustment factors such as equity or subject bonus points
2. **ATAR plus other criteria** – e.g. portfolio, audition, extra test, early offer conditional on minimum ATAR
3. **Only other criteria, ATAR not considered** – overseas assigned ranking or score, special consideration, portfolio alone, audition alone, school recommendation scheme with no minimum ATAR requirement

Note: ATAR is the key criteria in two of the three options.

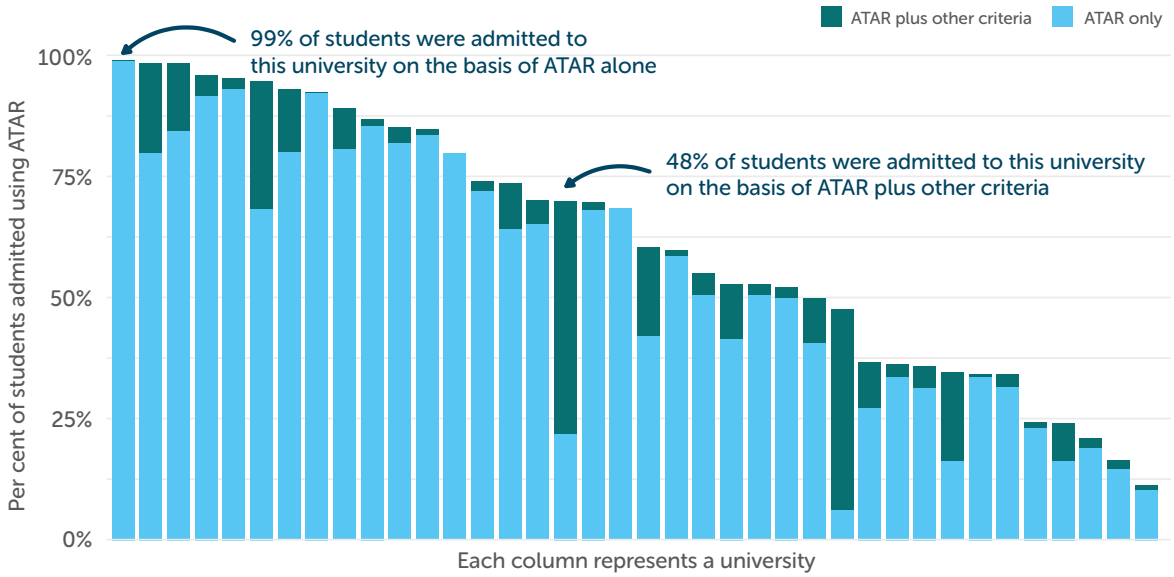
Great variation across universities

While universities are able to assess students' suitability for entry into an undergraduate course based on factors other than the ATAR, there is much variability in the extent to which individual institutions are doing so (see Figures 6 and 7).

Across the 39 universities, the proportion of students admitted on the basis of ATAR alone varies from almost 100% to less than 10%.

The use of ATAR is very different across Australia's 39 universities

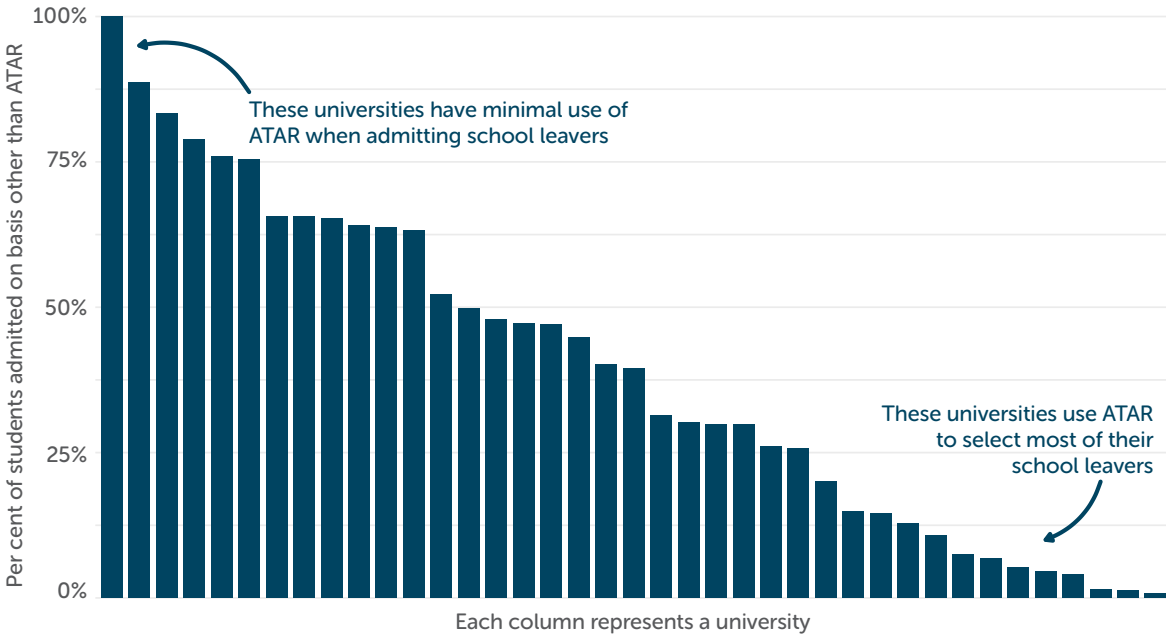
Figure 6: Proportion of students admitted on the basis of ATAR or ATAR plus other criteria by university, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Some universities barely use ATAR at all

Figure 7: Proportion of students admitted on the basis of other (non-ATAR) considerations by university, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Variation around the country

Students living in different states and territories experience the school to university pathway quite differently, with considerable variation in the extent to which ATAR is used.

Figure 8 shows the basis for admission according to the state or territory nominated by students as their home address.

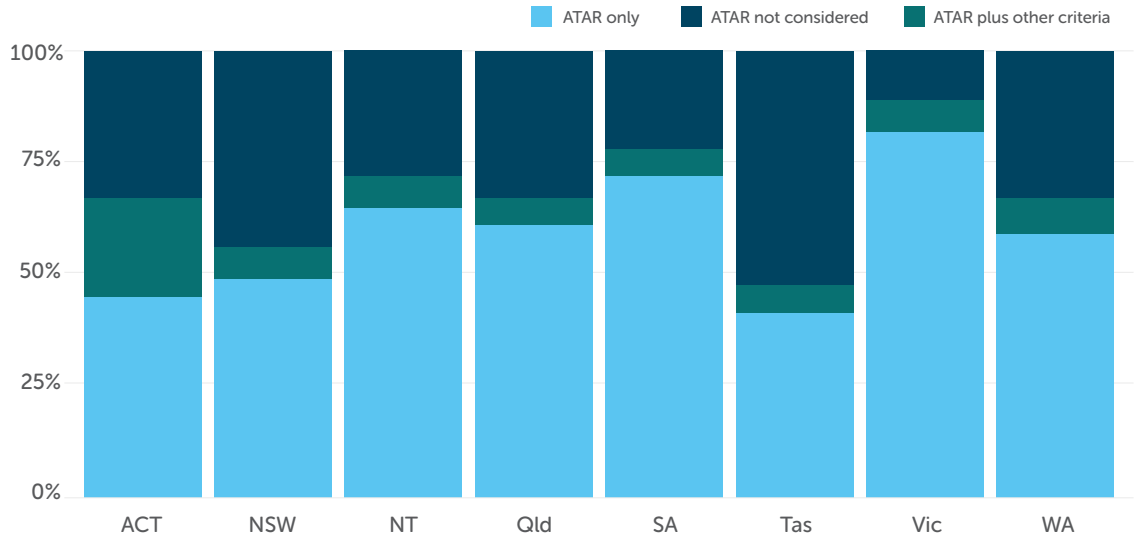
The ATAR plays the strongest role for Victorian students, with 82% of Victorian-based school leavers being admitted to university on the basis of ATAR only.

The ATAR is the least relevant for students completing school in Tasmania, with 52% of admissions for Tasmanian-based students being made without considering ATAR.

For New South Wales-based students, there was a relatively even mix of ATAR and non-ATAR admissions.

ATAR most relevant for Victorian students, least relevant for Tasmanian students

Figure 8: Basis of admission by state or territory of students' home address, distribution of student enrolments, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education Student Data Collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Student background and use of ATAR

The use of ATAR as a basis of admission to university also varies by student background characteristics (see Figure 9).

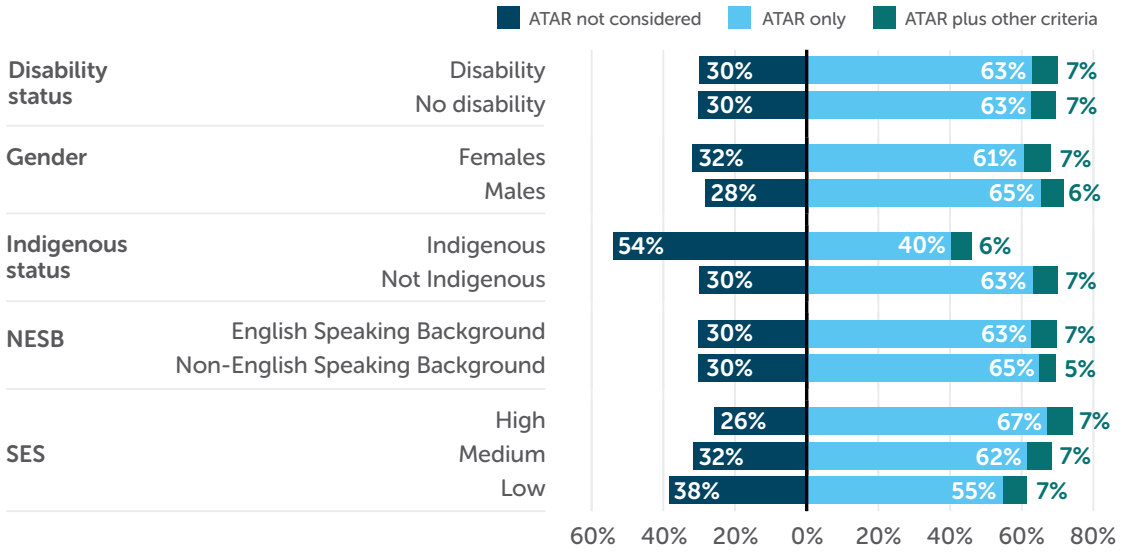
The likelihood of using a non-ATAR pathway increases with level of student disadvantage (39% of low-SES students compared to 26% of high-SES students).

Indigenous students are also more likely to enter through a non-ATAR pathway with over half entering using other criteria.

There is a small difference in basis of admission by gender (the proportion of males admitted via ATAR is slightly higher than among females), but very limited difference between students of non-English Speaking Backgrounds and those speaking English at home, as well as students with and without disability.

Disadvantaged students less likely to be admitted on the basis of ATAR

Figure 9: Basis of admission by student background characteristics, distribution of student enrolments, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Taken together, this analysis tells us that there are many and varied pathways from school to university, and that the ATAR figures more prominently in some journeys than others.

There are also some established patterns, based on a student's location and background, and the institution into which they seek admission.

Understanding the ATAR in the education ecosystem

As both a public symbol of achievement and a selection tool, the ATAR shapes decisions, incentives and perceptions across the education system. It appears to serve some stakeholders well, others less so.

The ATAR's influence is broad and deep. It's more than just a ranking used by students applying for a place at university. It's embedded in a wider policy and institutional ecosystem. A broad range of stakeholders engage with it, in different ways and for different purposes.

Mapping who engages with the ATAR, and in what ways, provides insight into its role, reach, and diverse impact on different education system stakeholders.

ATAR stakeholders

Students
For many students, the ATAR serves as a clear signal of academic achievement and a gateway to higher education. For others, it's less relevant, particularly for those pursuing vocational pathways or entering the workforce directly. However, they likely still feel its influence through school curriculum, subject offerings and pathways.

Families and communities
Parents and caregivers often support students in navigating Year 12, but not all have the same level of knowledge or confidence in navigating the system. For first-in-family students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, unfamiliarity with the ATAR and its implications may limit educational choices (Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), 2022; King et al., 2015).

Schools and school systems
Schools play a key role in preparing students for senior secondary assessments and in guiding subject choices. Systemic incentives, such as school rankings, reputational pressures and positioning in a competitive market can reinforce the emphasis on ATAR as a defining measure of success, particularly in academically focused school environments (Gemici et al., 2013; Gonski et al., 2011; Shergold et al., 2020).

Teachers and career practitioners
Classroom teachers and careers advisers play an important role in supporting students' academic development and post-school planning. The relative dominance of the ATAR as a tertiary entrance mechanism can influence pedagogy, assessment strategies and advice given about subject scaling, prerequisites and course options.

Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs)
State and territory-based TACs operationalise the ATAR. They are responsible for scaling study scores (according to local rules), converting scores into a national equivalent rank, and managing the logistics of tertiary applications and offers.

Universities and other tertiary institutions
Universities vary greatly in their reliance on the ATAR, but all must engage with it as a visible and sometimes politically sensitive entry mechanism. Some institutions use it to identify top academic performers; others use a broader mix of criteria. For open-access institutions or those prioritising equity entry schemes, the ATAR may be only one of several criteria for admission.

Policymakers and governments
Governments at both the state and federal level indirectly shape the ATAR's role and perceived importance through funding agreements, regulatory settings and reforms to senior secondary and tertiary education systems.

Policy settings on school accountability, university enrolment caps, tertiary entry for equity cohorts or alternative pathways all intersect with the ATAR in practice.

Employers and the wider public
Although designed primarily to be used as a selection tool for tertiary admission, the ATAR can sometimes be interpreted by employers, media and the community as a proxy for intelligence, diligence or capability. This symbolic power can shape broader expectations and perceptions of what success in schooling looks like, which pathways are valued, and how students, families and schools measure achievement.

The ATAR's influence is broad and deep. It's more than just a ranking used by students applying for a place at university. It's embedded in a wider policy and institutional ecosystem.

Who is well served by the ATAR?

The ATAR was originally developed to support comparability and efficiency in university admissions across Australia's universities. In that respect, it continues to serve some institutions well, particularly those with competitive entry thresholds and high applicant volumes.

However, our analysis suggests that, while the ATAR still dominates admissions processes in some contexts, it is no longer the backbone of the system it may once have been.

While views on the ATAR are mixed, it continues to serve some within the education ecosystem well. For these stakeholders, the ATAR provides structure, visibility, and a clear path to university entry, particularly in a complex school-to-tertiary landscape.

Tertiary institutions with competitive entry

Universities offering high-demand courses in medicine, law, engineering and commerce benefit most from the ATAR.

For these institutions, it provides an efficient and nationally consistent means of ranking applicants when places are limited. Australia's Group of Eight universities, in particular, continue to make a large proportion of school-leaver offers on the basis of ATAR alone.

This is confirmed by higher education student enrolment data, which show that reliance on ATAR varies widely across university affiliation (see Figure 10).

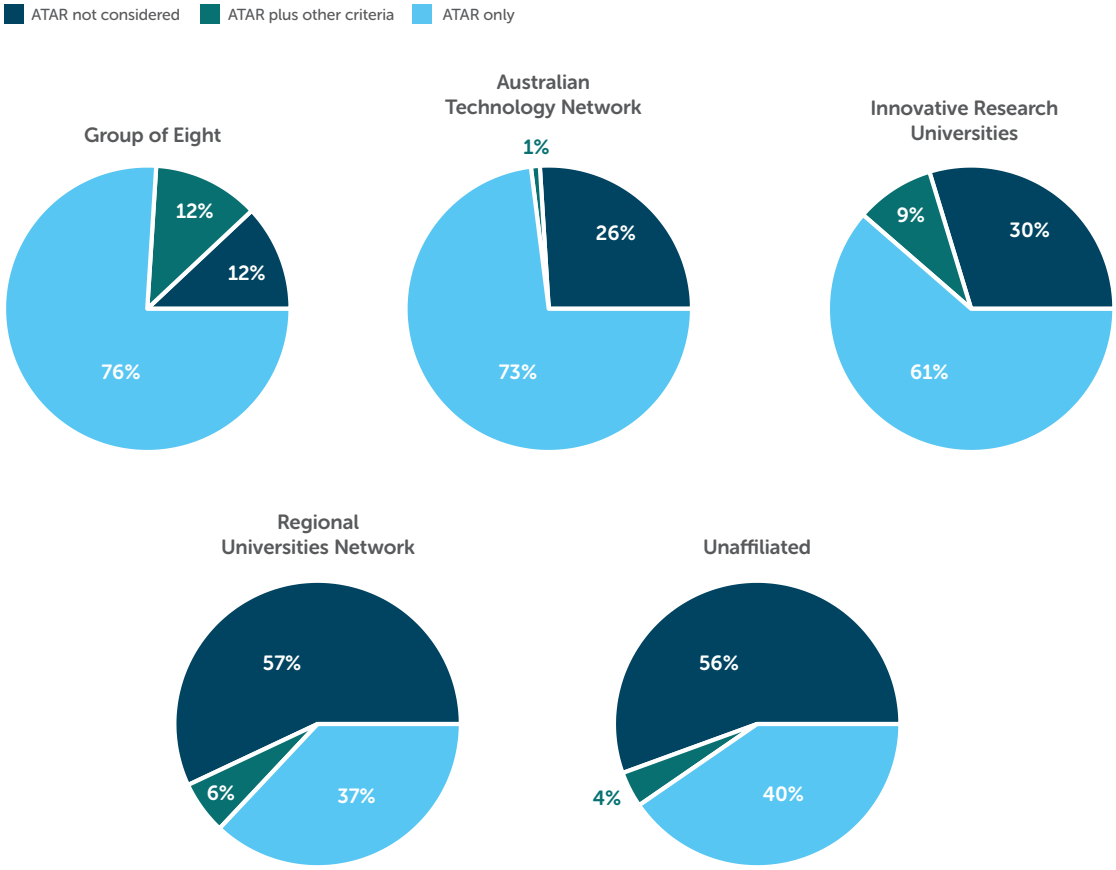
The Group of Eight universities, for example, used ATAR alone or in combination with other criteria for 88% of students enrolled in 2023, suggesting ATAR is used by these universities as a clear and administratively simple selection tool.

By contrast, other groups of universities have far less reliance on the ATAR as a basis for admission. Institutions that are part of the Regional Universities Network and those unaffiliated make more than half of their school-leaver offers without considering student ATAR (57% and 56% respectively).

This may reflect variations in course offerings and admission processes across universities, as well as differences in student profiles - for example, Group of Eight universities enrol relatively more high-ATAR students and proportionally fewer students from low-SES backgrounds.

Use of ATAR varies by type of university

Figure 10: Basis of admission by university affiliation: distribution of student enrolments, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

The ATAR's role is especially pronounced in selective programs where applicants' level of achievement is tightly clustered. In these settings the ATAR functions less as a broad sorting tool and more as a fine-tuned margin setter, with entry thresholds often pushed to the very top of the scale.

University admissions profiles confirm that the highest possible ATAR of 99.95 is routinely required in highly academically selective programs like medicine and law, with Law at UNSW and Sydney University among those reporting cut-offs in the upper 99 range (Universities Admissions Centre (UAC), 2024a).

Courses in engineering and sciences

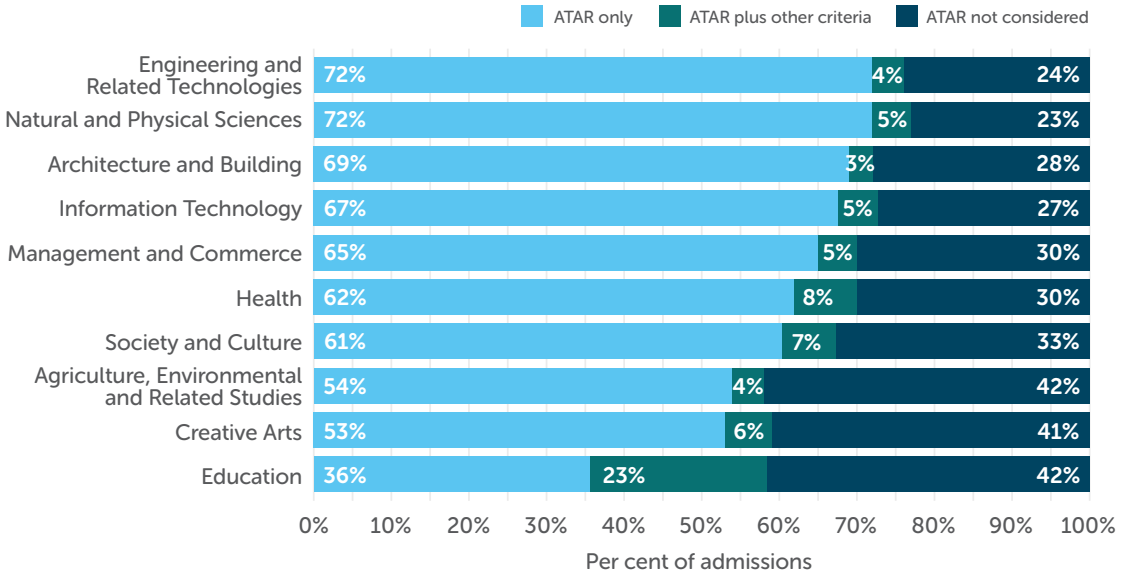
Across all commencing bachelor's degrees at an aggregate level, the use of ATAR for admission varies across course discipline domain for the school-leaver cohort.

As can be seen in Figure 11, in general, ATAR is less likely to be considered for undergraduate entry for recent school completers in subject areas such as Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies (43% non-ATAR), Education (42% non-ATAR) and Creative Arts (41% non-ATAR).

Conversely, school completers entering the Natural and Physical Sciences and Engineering fields are most reliant on their ATAR for admission (77% and 76% ATAR or ATAR plus other, respectively).

Some courses use ATAR more than others

Figure 11: Basis of admission by Broad Field of Education, distribution of student enrolments, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

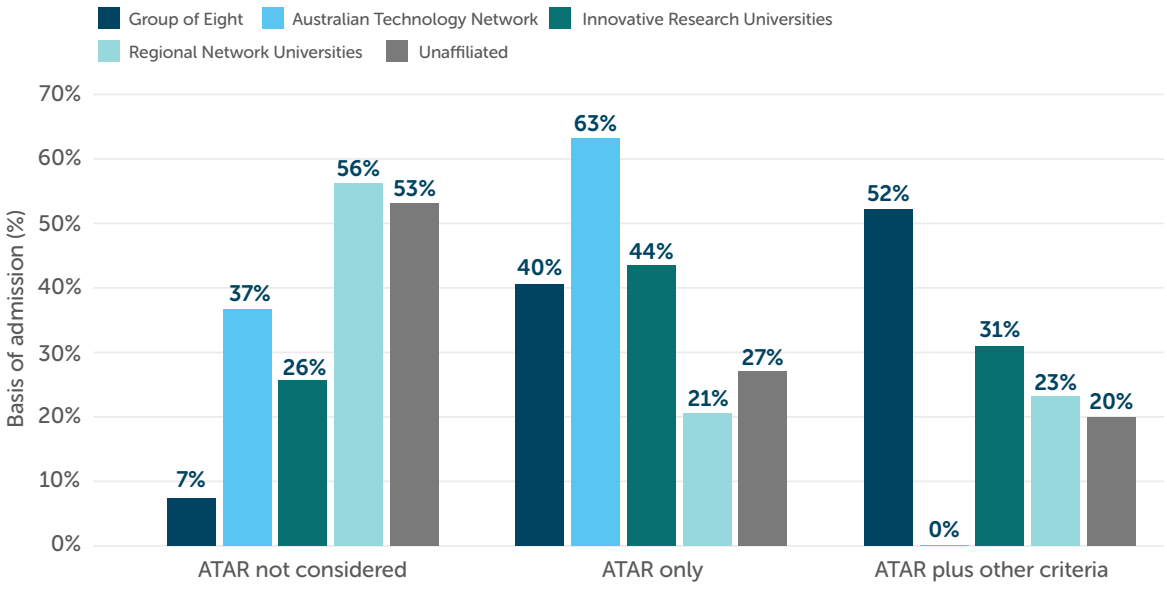
However, the ATAR continues to dominate admission within some universities even in those Fields of Education or subject disciplines showing more flexibility elsewhere.

For example, at an aggregate level, Education – which for the most part at bachelor's level includes preparatory teacher degrees – displays flexible use of both ATAR and non-ATAR pathways.

However, when disaggregated by university affiliation, some groupings such as Group of Eight are using only ATAR for admission, while others such as the Rural Universities Network are disregarding ATAR for more than half of their commencing students (see Figure 12). Other criteria combined with an ATAR includes an entry test for commencing initial teacher education courses. This pattern demonstrates the continued dominance of the ATAR in some institutions for school leavers, regardless of the field of study.

Group of Eight universities are more likely to use ATAR plus other criteria for education degrees

Figure 12: Basis for admission into bachelor's degrees in education: distribution of student enrolments by university affiliation, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Students in more advantaged schools and well-resourced communities

Students attending Independent and Catholic schools are more likely to pursue an ATAR pathway and are over-represented among high ATAR achievers. However, research suggests these patterns reflect underlying socioeconomic advantage and selective enrolment practices, rather than school sector alone (Li et al., 2022; Manny et al., 2020).

These students may benefit from access to a broader range of subjects, including those aligned with favourable scaling (e.g., advanced mathematics and science), more experienced teachers with deeper knowledge of ATAR processes and personalised academic support and career advice. They may also benefit from greater exposure to strategic decision-making around subject selection, scaling, and university prerequisites.

Research also shows that students from high-SES backgrounds are disproportionately represented in the top ATAR bands and in courses requiring high entry thresholds (Manny et al., 2020). However, the success of these students in achieving high ATARs is likely due the accumulated advantage of family resources, school context and academic preparation.

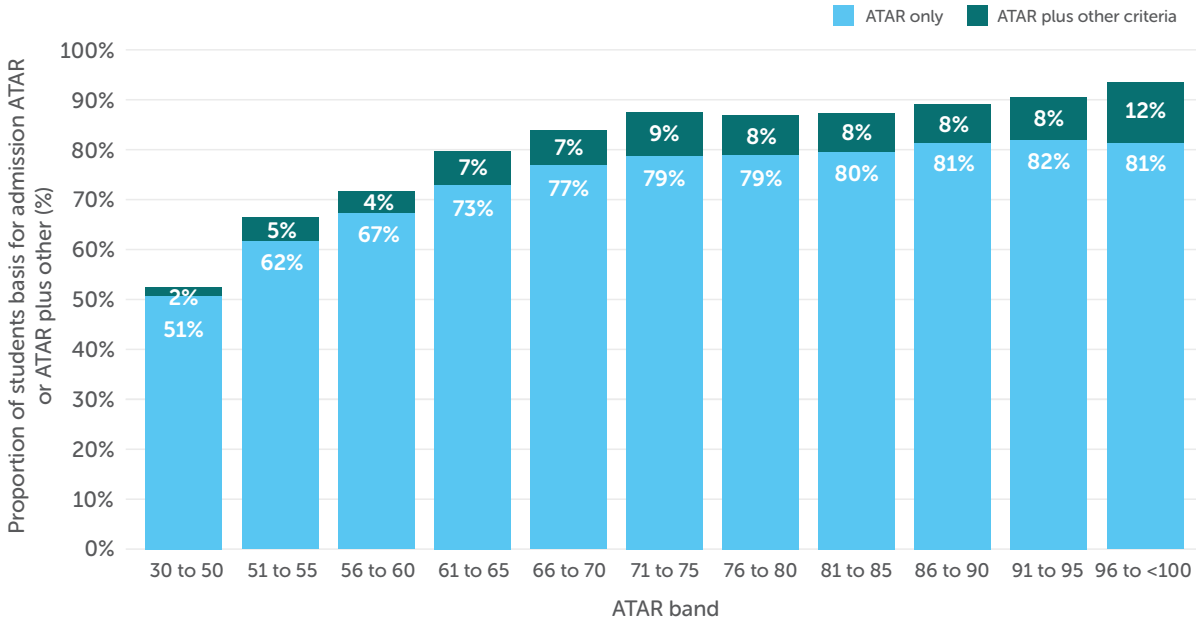
Students in the top ATAR bands

Unsurprisingly, the school leavers with higher ATARs are more likely to use their ATAR as a basis for entry to a university bachelor's degree than those with lower rankings (see Figure 13).

This pattern demonstrates the continued use of the ATAR as a rationing device in high-demand selection environments. In these contexts, the ATAR prevails as a fine-grained sorting tool among a cohort of high achievers. Conversely, in the lower ATAR bands, ATAR is employed to a lesser extent, thus demonstrating a more limited use for admission.

ATAR most relevant for students in the 85+ ATAR bands

Figure 13: Basis of admission by level of prior achievement (ATAR band): distribution of student enrolments, 2023 (%)



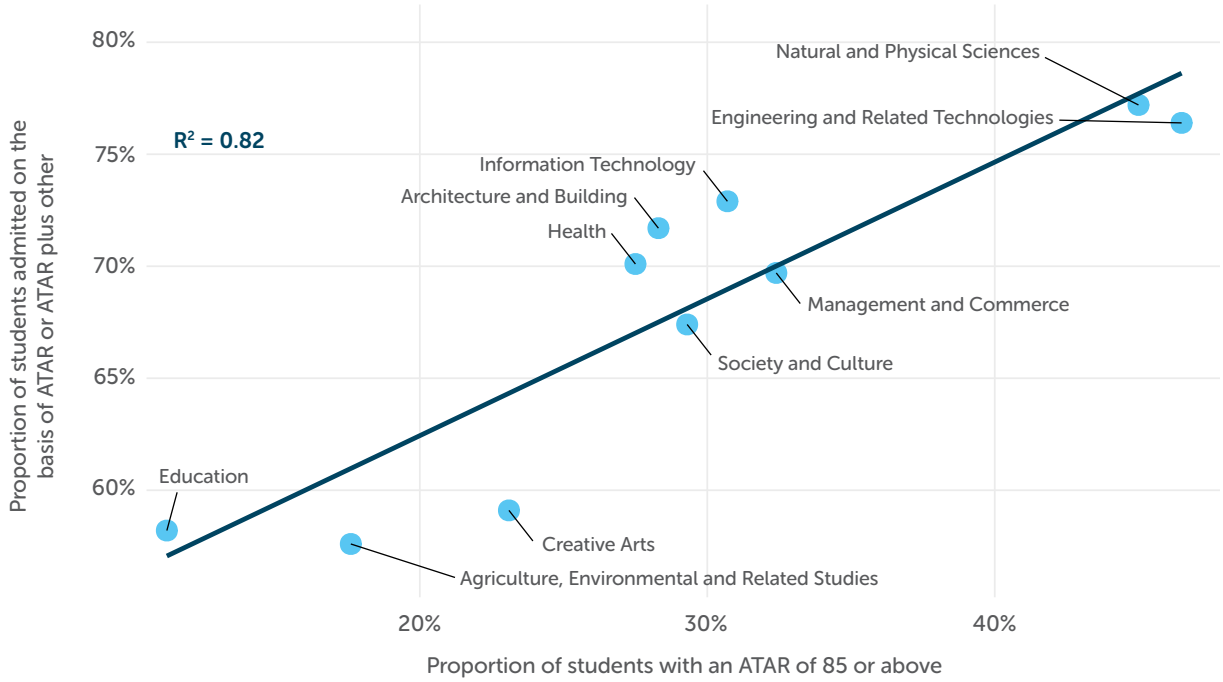
Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education Student Data Collection
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Fields of education attracting high achieving applicants

Fields of education which attract greater proportions of students from the highest ATAR bands are also more likely to be using ATAR as a basis for admission. The predictive nature of this relationship is demonstrated in Figure 14, where discipline areas such as Natural and Physical Sciences are both more likely to have higher concentrations of high-ATAR students and more likely to use ATAR as a basis for admission.

Fields of education with higher achieving applicants are more likely to rely on ATAR for admission

Figure 14: Proportion of students with an ATAR of 85 or above by basis of admission: Fields of Education, 2023 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of 2023 Higher Education student data collection
Note: 1. School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort
2. Includes students where ATAR band provided, n=75,505

Interstate applicants

A significant benefit of the ATAR is that it enables student mobility across Australia by acting as a nationally recognised measure of achievement.

Without the ATAR, universities would need to rely more heavily on jurisdiction-specific data or assessments. In this context, the ATAR provides a practical mechanism for comparability, simplifying cross-border admissions processes for students and institutions alike.

This national function was one of the key rationales for introducing the national ATAR in 2009, and while admissions practices have since diversified, it continues to play a meaningful role in supporting cross-border student choice.

Students choosing subjects that are 'scaled up'

The ATAR calculation process adjusts Year 12 subject results so they can be compared fairly across the diverse range of courses studied.

This process, known as scaling, reflects the overall academic strength of the cohort undertaking a subject, not whether a course is 'easy' or 'hard'.

Certain subjects are consistently adjusted upwards in ATAR scaling due to the strong academic performance of the student cohort. For example: in Victoria, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) system ensures Mathematical Methods and Specialist Mathematics are scaled fairly against each other and all other subjects to prevent disadvantage (VCAA / VTAC).

In New South Wales, the Universities Admissions Centre's official 2024 scaling report describes how scaling computations adjust to cohort strength, with courses such as Mathematics Extension 1 & 2, Chemistry, and Physics typically achieving higher scaled outcomes due to their student performance profiles.

Students choosing these 'scaled up' subjects can benefit from opportunities to study subjects that align closely with university prerequisites, particularly in high-demand fields such as health, engineering and commerce. They can also benefit from a clearer and more predictable trajectory into tertiary study, supported by established subject-course linkages.

At the same time, reports such as the Shergold Review (2020) have raised concerns that subject scaling and the emphasis placed on ATAR may discourage students from choosing a broad range of subjects.

Similar concerns are echoed in reports from the Universities Admissions Centre (Manny et al., 2019) and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Semo et al., 2024), which highlight how scaling influences subject selection and reinforces narrow academic pathways, particularly for disadvantaged students.

Who isn't well served by the ATAR?

While the ATAR works well for some students, others stand to benefit less and may even be disadvantaged by its broad influence on senior secondary schooling and the transition to life beyond school.

Year 12 applicants missing out on university offers

While overall university offer rates are high, not all Year 12 students applying for an undergraduate place are successful (Department of Education, 2025). The offer rate for first semester domestic undergraduate places for year 12s through Tertiary Admissions Centres and Table A universities in 2024 across Australia sits at 91%. However, this equates to 11,373 Year 12 university applicants missing out on receiving a place.

There is variation across jurisdictions: Victoria has the lowest offer rate at 88.5%, while in Tasmania, 99% of current Year 12 applicants receive an offer of a place (Department of Education, 2025). The young people missing out may find successful entry in second semester or take an alternative pathway to university in later years.

Students pursuing non-higher education pathways

Not all students achieving a senior secondary certificate intend to enter university – there are a broad range of successful post-school pathways that exist beyond this route. However, the ATAR has become dominant in public discourse as a visible marker of achievement at school, even for students who are not university-bound.

The dominance of this one, highly structured, relative marker of school achievement is less beneficial to those students seeking to demonstrate their skills and capabilities in subjects that are more applied, vocational or creative.

Students who do not pursue an ATAR can find themselves on pathways that attract less recognition and support and can find transitions to further study or work post-school more difficult (Osborne & Circelli, 2018).

Within schools, students pursuing non-ATAR pathways often receive less visibility and support, with resources such as career guidance, teacher attention, and academic planning disproportionately directed toward university-bound cohorts (Mitchell Institute & Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2017).

Students experiencing disadvantage

Students from equity groups, including those from low-SES backgrounds, regional and remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and those with disability or refugee experience are less well served by the ATAR.

- **Students from low-SES schools** are significantly under-represented among high ATAR scores, in part due to structural barriers such as limited subject access, lower school resourcing and reduced access to academic preparation or tutoring (Manny et al., 2019).
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students** face compounded disadvantage in education, including cultural disconnection and systemic under-representation in ATAR-eligible pathways. National reviews and research consistently show that Indigenous students are more likely to be directed into vocational or general streams, often with fewer institutional supports and more complex transitions (Bandias et al., 2013; Productivity Commission, 2021; Windley, 2017).

- **Students with disability** often encounter inflexible assessment structures and inconsistent adjustments. Reports highlight that many are streamed away from ATAR courses or find their achievements under-recognised within the ranking process (Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), 2023).
- **Students from refugee and migrant backgrounds** can be disadvantaged by the reliance on standardised assessments that do not account for interrupted schooling or English language development. Research shows these students remain under-represented in higher ATAR bands (Terry et al., 2016).

Despite some growth in equity group participation in higher education over the past decade – for example, low-SES student participation rising from 16.9% in 2011 to 17.2% in 2021, and Indigenous students from 1.4% to 1.9% over the same period – these gains remain well below parity targets (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023).

Further, many equity cohorts continue to enter higher education through non-ATAR pathways – alternatives that are essential for widening participation - yet transparency and outcomes across these routes remain uneven (Li et al., 2022).

Students impacted by exam stress and pressure

The pressures associated with the ATAR's ranking approach, and its perceived significance as a singular, high-stakes number, can have adverse effects on student wellbeing.

The ATAR score is often interpreted by students, families and schools as a reflection of intelligence, effort or future potential. This perception can contribute to anxiety, competition, or, in some cases, disengagement, especially for students who struggle under pressure or experience mental health challenges.

The most recent *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing* found high and growing levels of psychological distress among young people aged 16–24 (ABS, 2023). Academic pressure is one contributor to this trend (Carlisle et al., 2019).

There is evidence that high-stakes assessments, such as those required to achieve an ATAR, contribute to elevated stress and anxiety. A 2020 systematic global review of final-year secondary students found that distress increased as students progressed through senior school.

In the five Australian studies included, distress levels were high amongst Year 12 students, with 18% meeting clinical criteria for stress, 21% for anxiety, and 18% for depression in the leadup to final examinations (Wuthrich et al., 2020).

More recent survey research confirms the ongoing strain. A 2024 survey of over 400 Australian secondary students found that, of the one in seven considering leaving school without exams or an ATAR, nearly half cited prioritising mental health and one-third cited exam stress as the reason. Among current Year 12s, 64% said they would not achieve an ATAR to protect their mental health, and 45% to avoid exam stress. These proportions were even higher for students in government (51%) and Catholic schools (50%), boys-only schools (63%), and LGBTQI+ students (67%) (National Australia Bank (NAB), 2024).

While early entry or alternative admissions pathways may reduce pressure for some, the broader culture surrounding the ATAR continues to reinforce a narrow definition of success (Patfield, 2024).

Strengths and weaknesses

The ATAR was established to rank students according to a clearly agreed set of metrics, with a view to efficiently and transparently allocating limited university places. From an administrative perspective, it provides a straightforward and standardised means of comparison, which continues to appeal to many institutions and schools.

Yet transparency is not the same as fairness. The ATAR is norm-referenced, meaning it ranks students relative to one another rather than against an absolute standard. It does not account for contextual factors that shape educational opportunity, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, school resourcing, geographic isolation or disability. Numerous policy reports have raised concerns about the distributional impacts of this system.

The Grattan Institute's *Mapping Australian Higher Education* highlights that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are heavily overrepresented in the lower ATAR bands, limiting their access to admissions pathways. The OECD's *Education Indicators* in Focus No. 63 (2018) notes that while centralised, score-based admission systems can improve efficiency, they may also constrain access and, despite equity adjustments, minimum thresholds often remain significant barriers to entry.

In short, while the ATAR may offer consistency and clarity, it can also reinforce existing inequalities. The Productivity Commission's *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card* (2019) found that although admissions access expanded, students from disadvantaged backgrounds continued to face higher risks in outcomes, and ATAR remained an imprecise indicator of university success for equity groups.

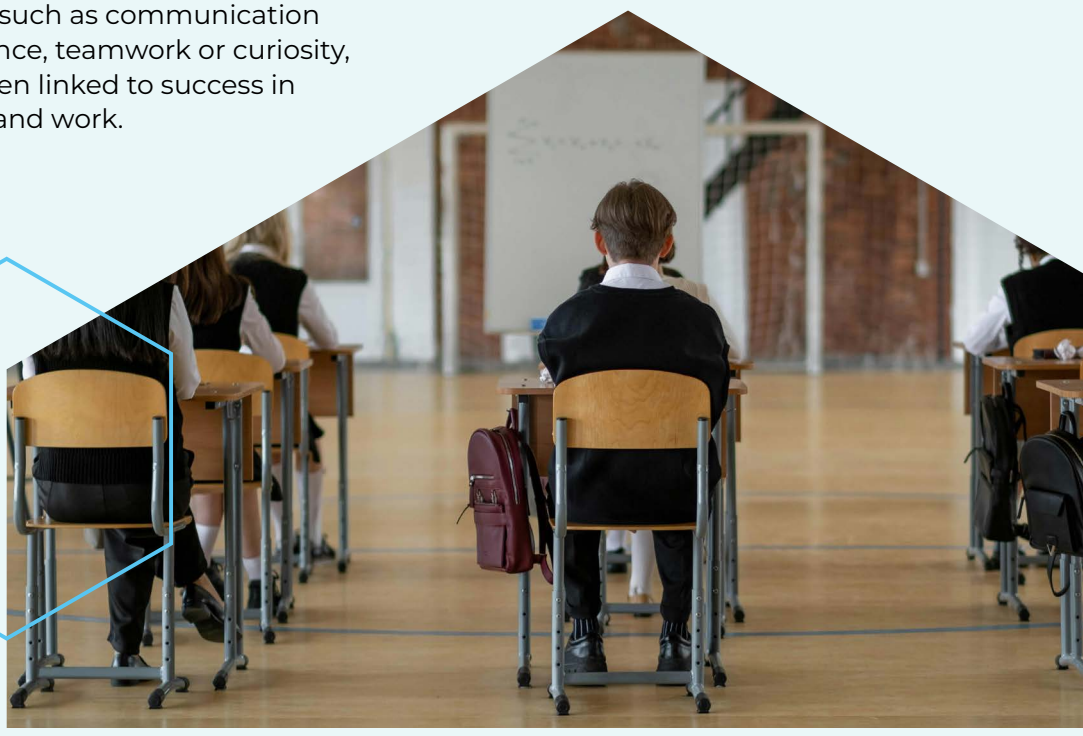
While the ATAR remains the most widely used tool for university admissions, its predictive value is subject to ongoing debate. Research by the Universities Admissions Centre (Manny et al., 2020) shows a strong correlation between higher ATARs and better first-year academic outcomes. For example, for students with an ATAR in the 90s, only 8% had a first-year GPA below 4 (failing grade). This rate increases as ATAR decreases: for students in the 70s, 29% recorded a failing GPA, and for those in the 50s, about 52% did so. Studies by the Grattan Institute (Norton et al., 2018) and the Centre for Independent Studies (Joseph, 2023), also find that higher ATARs are associated with stronger first-year performance, lower attrition and higher completion rates.

However, the ATAR's predictive strength diminishes below the 80 threshold and fails to capture broader factors influencing success. Norton (2018) and Knipe (2013) both argue that while the ATAR is moderately effective as a predictor of success, particularly for high-scoring students, it cannot account for individual differences in motivation, maturity, socioeconomic background or access to support. Norton also notes that part-time students balancing paid work, family and study have only about a 50% chance of completing their course within eight years, underscoring that factors beyond academic rank strongly influence success (2018). Broader studies confirm that non-cognitive factors such as self-efficacy, persistence and sense of belonging are powerful predictors of engagement and completion (Krause & Coates, 2008; Richardson et al., 2012)

By its very design, the ATAR is a comparative ranking of academic achievement. It is not intended to provide information about a student's interests, engagement or personal motivations. Nor does it capture broader capabilities such as communication skills, resilience, teamwork or curiosity, qualities often linked to success in both study and work.

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2024) recommended broader admissions, criteria to allow for tertiary admission on 'wider merits, rather than rankings alone'. It also emphasised that 'consistency and transparency are important to maintain trust in the admissions process and the appropriateness of entry standards'.

There are now a growing number of courses and institutions utilising alternative or complementary admissions approaches that recognise broader skills, achievements, and potential. Increasingly, attention is being directed toward approaches that provide a fuller picture of a student's skills and aspirations, recognising that these dimensions sit outside what a ranking system can capture.



What are some alternatives?

Efforts to reform or supplement the ATAR are not new. Over the past decade, multiple reports, pilots and research studies have proposed alternative models that aim to broaden the definition of merit, improve equity in access, and better align senior secondary assessment with tertiary and workforce demands.

These alternatives focus on two levels of reform: how student achievement is recognised at the completion of school, and how tertiary admissions processes are designed and implemented.

Measuring student achievement at school

Learner profiles

A major proposed alternative to ATAR is the development and adoption of learner profiles, which are digital or paper-based records that capture a broader range of student capabilities beyond academic scores. These profiles aim to reflect skills such as critical thinking, digital literacy, teamwork, and resilience alongside academic achievement.

The shift toward learner profiles has broad support. *Beyond ATAR: A Proposal for Change* (O'Connell et al., 2019) called for profiles to complement or eventually replace the ATAR, capturing a broader range of student capabilities. The Shergold Review and *Framing Success for All* (Milligan et al., 2022) reinforced this direction, advocating learner profiles as part of national reform to recognise diverse achievement.

Internationally, learner-profile approaches are increasingly being adopted to inform admissions and career guidance, with models such as Hong Kong's *Student Learning Profile* (Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2025) and the U.S. *Mastery Transcript* (O'Donnell, 2023) demonstrating the feasibility of more holistic assessment systems.

In Australia, momentum toward broader recognition of student achievement is growing. South Australia is piloting a *Capabilities and Learner Profile* that records students' personal enterprise, principled action, and collaboration alongside their academic results SACE Board, (South Australian Certificate of Education Board 2025). In Western Australia, all Year 12 completers receive the *Western Australian Statement of Student Achievement* (WASSA), which documents academic results, VET qualifications, endorsed programs, and other attainments (SCSA, 2025).

Facilitating tertiary admissions

Contextual admissions

One alternative is the integration of contextual admissions, which adjust selection decisions using data on school and student background. Indicators may include school-level ICSEA (Index of Community Socio-educational Disadvantage) scores, availability of subjects, or whether a student comes from a low-SES, regional/remote, Indigenous, or first-in-family background.

Internationally, contextual admissions are widely used in the U.K., U.S., and New Zealand, where evidence shows they improve access for underrepresented groups (Boliver et al., 2021; (OECD, 2019)).

Some Australian universities have piloted contextual approaches. For example, the University of Melbourne and Australian National University (ANU) have trialled admissions models that combine ATAR with school context and co-curricular contributions.

Grade point average (GPA) and internal assessments

In some systems, such as the U.S. and Canada, admissions decisions rely heavily on Grade Point Average (GPA) or internal school-based assessments. These models typically incorporate multiple assessments over several years of secondary schooling, offering a more sustained view of student achievement. However, in Australia, concerns about the comparability and reliability of GPA across schools have limited its standalone use in university admissions. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has highlighted that single metrics like GPA or ATAR may not adequately capture student potential, especially given the diversity of educational contexts (Edwards, 2016).

Nonetheless, there has been support in Australia for trialling hybrid approaches. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2022b) advocates for admissions frameworks that are transparent, fair, and accommodate student diversity. It suggests that calibrated versions of GPA or moderated teacher judgments could be explored as part of a multi-criteria admissions model, helping to ensure more equitable access to higher education.

Early and alternative entry schemes

A further alternative already operating widely is early entry programs, offered by many Australian universities. These schemes are often based on Year 11 performance, principal recommendation, and/or predicted scores. They provide flexibility and can reduce Year 12 pressure. However, critics have raised concerns about transparency, consistency, and limited reach to equity cohorts (Bennett et al., 2024; Sattler & Pech, 2024).

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) (2024) recommends clearer articulation of such schemes, along with consistent reporting requirements, to ensure students across all schools – urban, regional, and remote – can understand and access them equitably (Li et al., 2022).

These alternatives show that Australian university admissions are already diversifying, but unevenly. ATAR remains dominant for high-demand courses, yet the system increasingly relies on multiple pathways that are not nationally recognised or consistently understood.

Policy responses and directions

Across Australia a range of policy shifts are taking place, aiming to create multi-pathway models that recognise a broader range of student skills, reduce systemic inequities and better align secondary schooling with national policy priorities.

Promoting equity and access

A primary driver of reform is the need to address inequities in the current system and improve access to higher education for disadvantaged students.

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2024) identified the need to reform both school and university systems to meet national growth and equity targets.

Research highlights how secondary school streaming disproportionately channels Indigenous and low-SES students into non-ATAR options. Addressing this inequity requires stronger university engagement to ensure academic pathways remain accessible to all students, regardless of their background (Harvey et al., 2023).

The Shergold Review (2020) recommended that academic pathways should no longer have more privileged access to school resources than vocational options like apprenticeships and traineeships, arguing that all school pathways must be delivered to the same high standard.

Broadening university selection processes

There is growing recognition that the ATAR represents only one measure of success and that a more holistic approach is needed - one that captures students' skills, interests and potential alongside academic results (Shergold et al., 2020).

As stated earlier, a key proposal in response to this is the creation of a Learner Profile, which could serve as a trusted and common method for representing the full range of a student's achievements and skills developed both inside and outside of school (University of Technology Sydney (UTS), 2025).

The Strengths-Based Tertiary Pathways project, led by UTS in collaboration with Learning Creates, the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC), and the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) is proposing a unified, strengths-based admissions system that would harmonise alternative entry pathways and focus on tools like portfolios and enabling programs instead of relying solely on the ATAR (UTS, 2025).

Strengthening and valuing vocational pathways

If undue focus on the ATAR is seen to have a distortionary impact on educational expectations, then related policy responses have attempted to elevate the status of vocational and applied learning to ensure it is not seen as a 'second' or 'lesser' option.

The Victorian Firth Review led to the replacement of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) with the *VCE Vocational Major*, a move designed to improve the 'parity of esteem between academic and vocational streams' and clarify tertiary pathways (2020).

Western Australia's *Pathways for Post-School Success* review called for an expansion of what can count toward an ATAR and, critically, ensure that this includes VET so that students can have a broader range of their achievements recognised through this measure (Louden, 2024).

Improving admissions transparency

To empower students and their families, recent reforms have aimed to make the university admissions process more transparent and accessible. The Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) Review of Admissions Transparency (2016–2023) led to the standardisation of reporting on selection ranks, subject prerequisites, and non-ATAR criteria (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2016).

These reforms were implemented through the Admissions Transparency Implementation Working Group, a collaboration between government and the higher education sector, and later reviewed by TEQSA to ensure effective implementation and the establishment of a single, centralised entry point for admissions information.

This push for transparency seeks to clarify the role of the ATAR in admissions, address public misconceptions, and provide prospective students with clearer, more useful information to support informed decisions about courses and institutions.

State and territory reforms in action

This national shift is reflected in a range of state and territory-level practices, including improved transparency of admission criteria, publication of selection-rank and ATAR profiles, enhanced reporting of entry pathways for equity groups, and clearer communication of how other qualifications (such as VET certificates) contribute to tertiary admission:

State/Territory	Reform/Change	Source
Northern Territory (NT Government)	Secondary Reform Program introduces comprehensive Years 7–12 schooling and guaranteed NTCET pathways for all students. Implementation begins 2026 (Darwin/ Palmerston) and 2027 (Alice Springs).	NT Government (2025b)
NSW & ACT (UAC)	The Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) continues to administer the Educational Access Scheme (EAS) and recognise the STAT test for admission pathways.	UAC (2024b)
Queensland (QTAC)	ATAR system adopted 2019; allows inclusion of VET qualifications (Cert III+) as part of selection rank.	QTAC (2024a)
South Australia (SATAC)	University admissions recognise SACE/NTCET results and *Recognised Studies* (including VET Certificate III or above) that can contribute to the ATAR via the flexible option.	SATAC (2024)
Tasmania (TASC)	From 2025, the ATAR is calculated using a student's best Level 3 and 4 results across up to two years (Years 11–13), replacing the previous 'final-year-only' rule.	TASC (2025b)
Victoria (VTAC)	2025 selection cycle reports include Scaling, Aggregate-to-ATAR and Lowest Selection Rank data. These confirm how student performance is converted into ATARs and selection ranks for university admission.	VTAC (2025)
Western Australia (TISC)	Publication of school median ATAR league tables ceased (2022–23) to reduce competitive pressure; SCSA now reports aggregated student-achievement data.	TISC (2023)

These policy developments reflect a growing recognition that a single metric cannot capture the complex and evolving objectives of Australia's education system.

Where does this leave us?

Fifteen years after its introduction, the ATAR operates within a more varied and expanded tertiary education system.

Many universities continue to use the ATAR, but in conjunction with a wider range of selection tools, sparking questions about its changing role and purpose. These questions rightly include discussions about its evolving impact on equity, school curriculum and the development of broader capabilities.

This debate is taking place in a time of unprecedented advances in technology, with generative AI reshaping how we learn and work, alongside increasing diversity in courses, modes of study and pathways into careers for a growing and more varied student population.

Declining relevance - enduring influence

Despite the ATAR's high profile in schools and the community, our analysis of recent data shows 30% or three in ten admissions made to recent school leavers were made with no reference to ATAR.

This shift reflects a system in which the ATAR is no longer the singular gateway to higher education. Yet, its symbolic or 'soft' power endures. The ATAR continues to shape the choices of students, families and schools to a degree that, given the data on its use, is perhaps unwarranted.

Each December, the release of ATAR results attracts intense media attention, with front-page coverage reinforcing the perception that ATAR is the ultimate measure of success. As O'Connell et al. (2019) put it, 'a single number does not capture the attainments and qualities of any student, and is not a reliable predictor of future academic success for students with scores below 70, or success in life.'

Inconsistency

TEQSA's admissions transparency project found wide variation in how institutions present entry information, including ATAR profiles, adjustment factors, and the role of non-ATAR pathways. This inconsistency has created confusion for students, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds (TEQSA, 2022a).

The NCSEHE has also highlighted that inconsistent communication about admission practices can undermine student confidence in the system and disproportionately affect equity cohorts (Bennett et al., 2024).

While this variation reflects institutional autonomy, it raises important questions about fairness, clarity, and accessibility - especially for students who lack access to strong guidance or come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Limited or distorted choices

The ATAR continues to shape the senior secondary curriculum, encouraging strategic subject choices to maximise ranking, which may not align with student interests or long-term aspirations. This impact produces a documented 'curriculum narrowing' effect, where teaching and learning are increasingly oriented toward Year 12 outcomes. As the Shergold Review noted, many teachers are frustrated by the dominance of a single number that constrains their capacity to support the broader learning, wellbeing and aspirations of all students (2020).

Reinforcing inequity

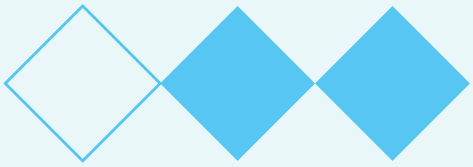
The data is clear that ATAR disproportionately rewards students from high-SES backgrounds, while compounding barriers for those from regional, low-income, Indigenous, and disability cohorts. The ATAR itself does not account for differences in school resourcing, access to subjects or the availability of academic support. Nor does it capture or reward skills such as collaboration, creativity, or community contribution, which may be particularly salient for equity cohorts.

Global comparisons: Australia in the minority

Australia's reliance on a centralised, rank-based system places it in a minority internationally. Most OECD countries use more holistic or decentralised admissions frameworks that draw on multiple data points, such as GPA, teacher recommendations, aptitude testing, and contextual factors. While ATAR offers efficiency and comparability, it lacks the flexibility to respond to diverse learner backgrounds or evolving skill demands.

New OECD data reinforces this international context: *Education at a Glance 2024* highlights widening equity gaps in tertiary participation and the importance of diversified entry routes (OECD, 2024).

Countries such as the Netherlands, the U.K. and the U.S. have shifted toward frameworks that explicitly consider student context, course fit, and broader capabilities. The OECD concludes that diversified admissions systems are more likely to promote inclusion, particularly for under-represented groups (2019).



It’s clear that, while the ATAR figures strongly in some students’ pathways, it is nearly irrelevant to others.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that three in ten Australian university admissions for recent school leavers are being made without reference to an ATAR.

It’s clear that, while the ATAR figures strongly in some students’ pathways, it is nearly irrelevant to others. Does this mean its perceived importance is outsized compared to its use? If this is the case, what does this mean for schools, students and the nation?

Does the ATAR unnecessarily narrow the focus at a time when young people should be opening their eyes to the wider possibilities of the world beyond the school gate? Or does it support competition, rigour and the pursuit of excellence?

It appears Australia does now have a ‘multitrack’ system. For some, the ATAR paves the way smoothly –- a concrete conduit to the next opportunity. While for others it is just one of many stepping stones, in what may be an uneven or challenging path.

No single actor holds a strong policy lever in relation to the ATAR. The policies and practices that could shape the ATAR’s future are widely dispersed across a broad education eco-system, held by governments, curriculum authorities, school system leaders, tertiary admission centres, university leaders, schools and students themselves.

We hope this report provides all these stakeholders with a clear-sighted, data rich perspective on the ATAR’s role, use, strengths and weaknesses as they consider these questions and more.

Glossary of terms and abbreviations

ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank): A percentile ranking between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to a notional Year 12 cohort in their state or territory. Used as a key selection tool for university admission.

Adjustment factors (previously 'bonus points'): Points added to a student's ATAR for reasons such as location, disadvantage, or subject choice. Adjustment factors produce a selection rank, which is what universities actually use to make offers. May include equity adjustments (for disadvantage), location adjustments (for regional or remote students), and subject adjustments (for taking certain prerequisite or advanced subjects). Adjustment factors modify, but do not replace, a student's ATAR to create a selection rank.

Admission categories (ATAR only / ATAR plus other criteria / Other criteria only): The three main categories used by universities to classify admission offers for recent school leavers:

- ATAR only – admission based solely on ATAR (may include adjustment factors).
- ATAR plus other criteria – admission based on ATAR alongside additional evidence such as a portfolio, audition, or test.
- Other criteria only – admission not based on ATAR, for example via special consideration, recommendation, or non-standard assessment.

Apparent retention rate: A measure of student retention in schooling, calculated by dividing the number of full-time Year 12 students in a given year by the number of full-time Year 7 students five years earlier. It provides an estimate (not a true cohort measure) of the proportion of students who remain in school to Year 12.

Applied learning: Education focused on practical and work-related skills, often delivered through vocational programs or alternative Year 12 pathways (e.g., VET, VCE Vocational Major).

Australian Technology Network (ATN): A group of Australian universities with a focus on industry engagement and applied research. Members include Curtin University, RMIT University, University of South Australia, University of Technology Sydney, Deakin University and The University of Newcastle.

Bachelor's degree (honours or pass): Undergraduate university qualifications typically taking three to four years. 'Honours' degrees include an additional research-focused year or higher academic standard, while 'pass' degrees are the standard program of study without an extra research component.

Basis for admission: The main criteria or qualification used by a university when assessing an applicant for entry into a course. This may include ATAR for recent school leavers, prior higher education study, a completed VET qualification, or other pathways such as enabling or bridging programs.

Contextual admissions: Admissions models that consider a student's background and schooling context (e.g., school ICSEA score, equity cohort status) in addition to their ATAR.

Curriculum narrowing: The effect of ATAR pressures on subject choice and teaching, where students and schools focus heavily on subjects with favourable scaling or university prerequisites, sometimes at the expense of breadth and creativity.

EAS (Educational Access Scheme): Programs run by Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) that provide adjustment factors to recognise educational disadvantage.

Early entry / alternative entry schemes: University programs that make offers before final Year 12 results are available, often based on Year 11 results, school recommendations, or predicted performance.

Equity cohorts: Groups under-represented in higher education, including students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, regional and remote students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, students with disability, and those with refugee or non-English speaking backgrounds.

Enabling or bridging course: A preparatory program designed to help students meet entry requirements or develop academic skills for higher education study.

Foundation year (schooling): The first year of formal primary education in Australia. It is known by different names across jurisdictions, such as 'Kindergarten' (NSW and ACT), 'Reception' (SA), 'Pre-primary' (WA) and 'Transition' (NT).

GPA (Grade Point Average): A cumulative average of school or university grades. More commonly used overseas than in Australia for tertiary admission.

Group of Eight (Go8): A coalition of Australia's leading research-intensive universities: The University of Adelaide, The Australian National University, The University of Melbourne, Monash University, The University of New South Wales, The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney, and The University of Western Australia.

High-level subject areas: Broad learning domains used in curriculum and reporting frameworks (e.g., English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, The Arts, Health and Physical Education, Technologies, and Languages).

Innovative Research Universities (IRU): A group of Australian universities committed to inclusive education and innovative research. Members include Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Flinders University, Western Sydney University, University of Canberra and Murdoch University.

Learner profile: A digital or paper-based record of student capabilities, achievements, and skills (e.g., teamwork, resilience, digital literacy) alongside academic results. It has been proposed as a supplement or alternative to ATAR.

Recent school leaver: Students commencing a university course having left secondary school in the three years prior. This timeframe is used because applicants who are offered a place on finishing Year 12, but defer their commencement for up to two years, are considered to be recent school leavers.

Regional Universities Network (RUN): A group of Australian universities with a strong regional presence and commitment to serving regional communities. Members include Central Queensland University, Charles Sturt University, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

Scaling: The statistical process of adjusting subject results so they can be fairly compared across the state/territory. Scaling reflects the overall academic strength of the cohort taking a subject, not the inherent difficulty of the subject.

Selection rank: The final ranking used by universities when deciding offers. It may be based on ATAR plus adjustment factors, VET qualifications, prior study, GPA, or other considerations.

STAT (Special Tertiary Admissions Test): A standardised aptitude test used by some universities, particularly for mature-age or non-ATAR applicants.

Table A universities: Australian higher education institutions are classified in the Higher Education Support Act 2003 as Table A, B or C, which reflect levels of access to Commonwealth funding and supports. Table A universities – of which there are 39 in total – can access HECS-HELP for all award courses, and are eligible for Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund grants.

TACs (Tertiary Admissions Centres): State/territory bodies that manage scaling, ATAR calculations, and applications: UAC (NSW/ACT), VTAC (Vic), QTAC (Qld), SATAC (SA/NT), TISC (WA).

TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency): The national regulator for higher education institutions.

Tertiary course: Any formal post-school education or training program leading to a recognised qualification at a higher education or vocational education and training (VET) level.

UA (Universities Australia): The peak body representing Australian universities.

VET (Vocational Education and Training): Post-school education and training focused on applied skills, including apprenticeships, traineeships, and certificate/diploma qualifications.

WASSA (Western Australian Statement of Student Achievement): A comprehensive record provided to all WA Year 12 students that includes ATAR results, VET qualifications, and other attainments.

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