

Assessing the ATAR

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

The Mitchell Institute, Victoria University

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To Australian secondary school students, the ATAR looms large – a rank, a passport, a marker of success. But how relevant is it for students, schools and universities today?

Existing in its current form since 2009, the ATAR was established to assist universities to 'sort' students for selection and admission to high demand courses. But since then, it has expanded to become a measure of secondary school achievement alongside a tool for admission to tertiary education.

While often misunderstood as a 'mark' out of a potential 100, the ATAR is a percentile rank between 0 to 99.95, representing a student's relative position compared to their peers based on scaled Year 12 subject scores. Despite its national status, the process of calculating the ATAR remains strongly grounded in state and territory level entities and processes.

To some school students, teachers and families, it may feel as though the ATAR is the only thing that matters in determining future opportunities and pathways. Yet our analysis finds the reality is much more nuanced. There is a great deal of variation in the proportion of Australian senior secondary students opting to receive an ATAR, and in the extent to which ATARs are used in tertiary admission.

ATAR and schooling

Not all students completing Year 12 intend to enter university and there are a broad range of successful post-school pathways, including apprenticeships, vocational education and training courses and opportunities in full-time work.

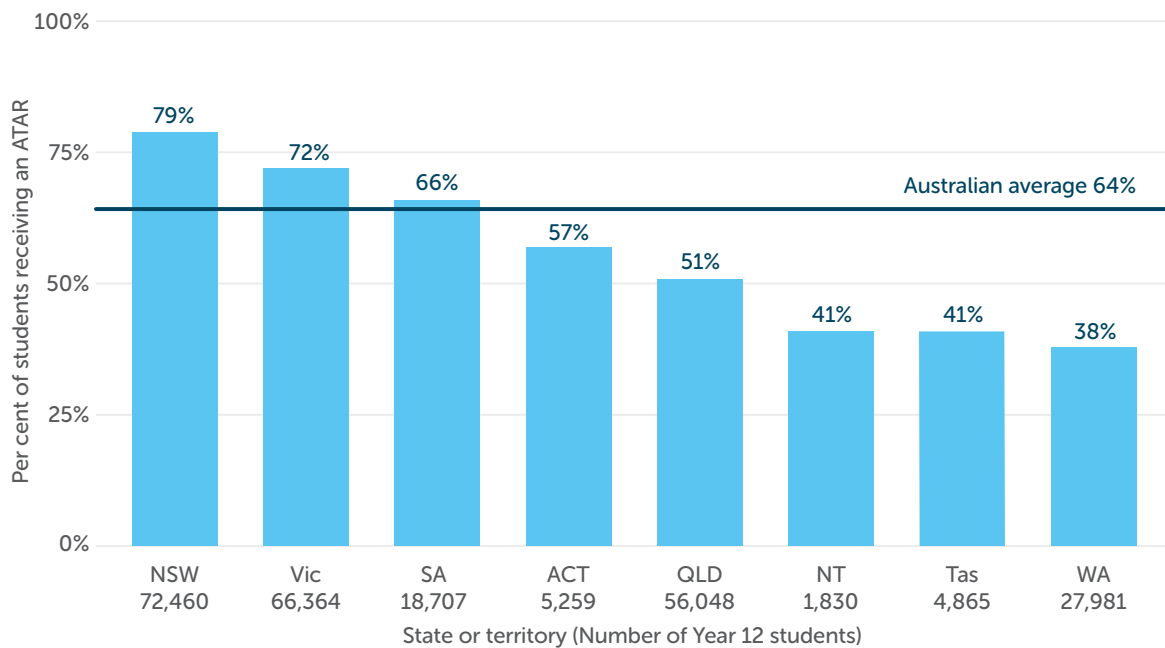
Indeed, under two-thirds of Year 12 students choose to undertake an ATAR pathway, with 64% of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR across Australia in 2024.

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, from 79% in New South Wales to 38% in Western Australia.

The share 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.

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

Proportion of Year 12 students receiving an ATAR by state and territory, 2024 (%)



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of ABS, state and territory government data

ATAR and tertiary admission

For Australian school leavers who have completed a senior school certificate there are well established links to higher education, with the ATAR acting as a conduit.

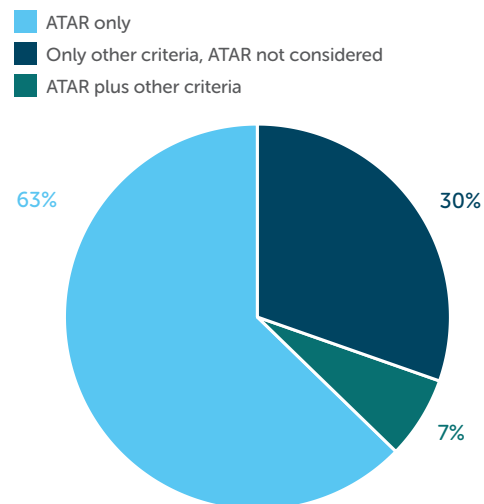
But even for these students, the ATAR is not as determinative as we may be led to believe. It figures more prominently in some pathways than others, varying by a student's location and background, course disciplines, and the institution into which they seek admission.

In 2023, there were over 230,000 domestic students commencing a bachelor's degree (honours or pass) across Australia's universities. Of these, around half had recently completed Year 12 (school leaver cohort).

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, and 30% were admitted solely on the basis of other (non-ATAR) criteria.

Three in ten school leaver admissions to university do not use ATAR

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.

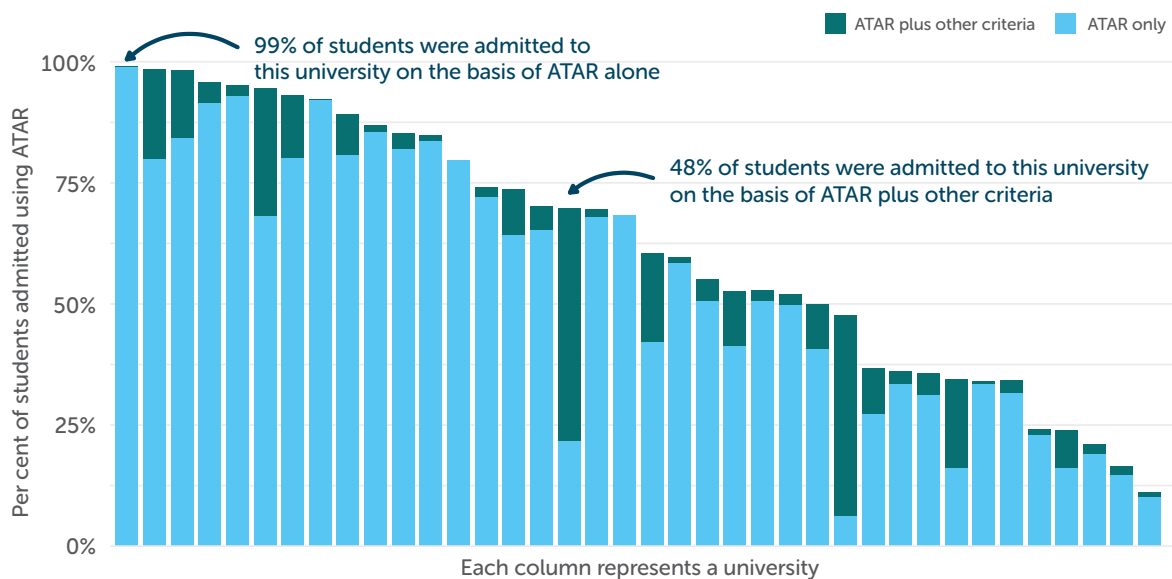
Variation across universities and courses

While universities can 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.

Across the 39 universities, the proportion of domestic undergraduate students admitted on the basis of ATAR alone varies from almost 100% at one to around 10% at another.

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

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

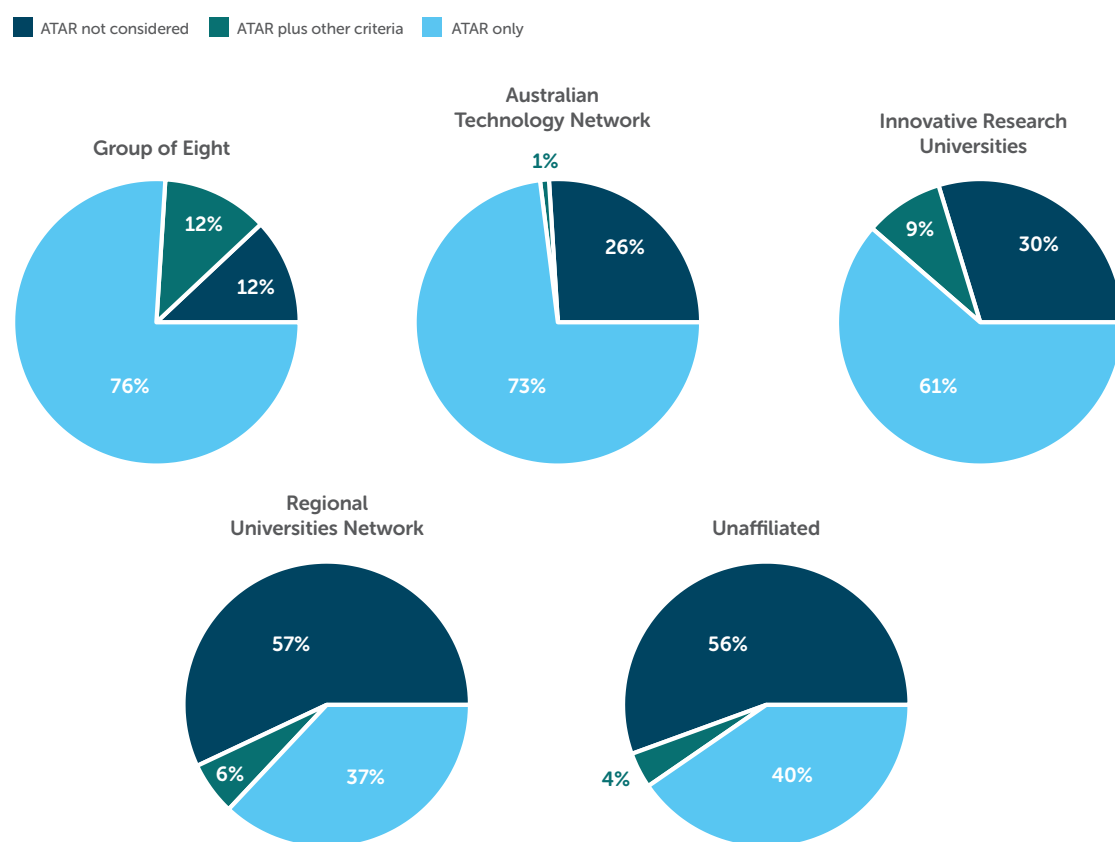
Note: School leaver, commencing, bachelor's degree, domestic student cohort

Reliance on ATAR for admission also varies widely across university affiliation. Australia's Group of Eight universities, for example, make 88% of school leaver offers on the basis of ATAR alone or in combination with other criteria.

Other groups of universities make less use of the ATAR in admissions. 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).

ATAR basis varies by university grouping

Share of school leaver admissions by university affiliation and use of ATAR, 2023 (%)



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

The use of ATAR for admission varies across course field of education. Undergraduate bachelor's degrees 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.

Variation around the country

There is considerable diversity in the extent to which ATAR is used for admission to bachelor's degree courses in each state and territory.

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

Variation across student background characteristics

The use of ATAR in admission to university also varies by student background characteristics.

A greater proportion of high socio-economic status (SES) students are

admitted to university on the basis of ATAR alone (67%) compared to low SES students (55%). Conversely, 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 of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander undergraduates entering using other criteria.

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%).

There is very limited difference in the use of ATAR by universities as a basis for admission between students of non-English speaking backgrounds and those speaking English at home, as well as students with and without disability.

ATAR stakeholders

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.



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 some families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, unfamiliarity with the ATAR and its implications may limit educational choices.



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.



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.



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 can shape broader perceptions of what success in schooling looks like, which pathways are valued, and how students, families and schools measure achievement.

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, including its evolving impact on equity, school curriculum and the development of broader capabilities.

The ATAR is no longer the singular gateway to higher education. Yet, despite declining relevance, it maintains an enduring influence, by continuing to shape the choices of students, families and schools.

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.