Researchers found Year 11 students from disadvantaged schools viewed tertiary entrance schemes as confusing and burdensome.

Students from higher income schools are better able to “game” entrance into university because they have a superior understanding of tertiary entrance schemes and how best to manipulate Year 12 subjects, a new report has found.

Research by La Trobe University has found Year 11 students from disadvantaged and regional schools viewed tertiary entrance schemes as confusing and burdensome, had a limited understanding of the role Year 12 subjects played in securing a tertiary place and had much less advice and support about post-school options.

The findings come despite more than $500 million of federal funds being funneled into programs to encourage lower income and regional students to enter university over the past five years.

Despite the funds, the study of more than 1000 Year 11 students across Victoria and NSW uncovered a disturbing number from low-income or regional areas who had limited access to advisers to help them make sense of the convoluted system and a large number who were not aware of funding programs aimed at helping them enter university.
They also did not know that their choice of Year 12 subjects could affect their ATAR score, and even if they were they did not have access to those higher weighted subjects.

Chief researcher Andrew Harvey said “messy” admissions schemes across Australia were working against disadvantaged students. “It’s all a mystery to them and they don’t even start to try and understand it until the middle of Year 12 and then it’s so confusing they are just making guesses or giving up,” he said.

“They start Year 12 with little understanding that the subjects they have chosen can make a big difference in their final scores, they have limited subject choice anyway and then when it’s time to apply it’s extremely complex.”

Only a third of disadvantaged students chose their Year 12 subjects based on the knowledge those subjects would help their final score, compared with almost 50 per cent of students from high-income areas.

“Students from high SES schools, like private schools, will take maths and physics and French because they know or have been told they are weighted up, which helps turn a solid mark into a great mark,” Dr Harvey said.

It found that students from high-income and metropolitan schools were more likely to be influenced in their post-school options by parents, whereas their low-socio or regional counterparts relied heavily on teachers and career advisers.