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## Blind alleys in multiple university entry pathways

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Illustration: John Tiedemann *Source:* The Australian

**THE federal government will soon allocate \$119 million to universities to support their partnerships with disadvantaged schools. Some of this money will be used to develop new recruitment pathways for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.**

Schools will identify students likely to succeed at university and these students will receive conditional or guaranteed offers from a partner university.

Importantly, school partnerships enable universities to move beyond the dominant Australian Tertiary Admission Rank system to recruit students.

From an equity perspective, ATAR is broken. Numerous studies highlight the close links between tertiary rank and family wealth. Put simply, a rich student is likely to receive a high rank while a poor student is likely to receive a low rank. University access will not be expanded via an entry system that largely replicates socioeconomic divisions.

If not through ATAR, how can universities ensure they select academically prepared students, regardless of background? A growing alternative is to ask schools themselves to recommend students to the university.

Such schemes acknowledge that an applicant's background plays an important role in shaping their ability and decision to pursue higher education. School recommendations may partially compensate for background by taking disadvantage into account in the admission process.

The offer of an early guaranteed place also gives students greater security and potentially boosts their morale.

Partnerships are targeted and help to facilitate working relationships between the institution and feeder secondary schools. Secondary teachers also have a unique insider perspective of potential students unavailable to the university. In theory, teachers should be able to provide valuable insights into potential students' motivations, aspirations and abilities beyond their academic record.

Nevertheless, the strengths of school recommendations may also be their weakness. Personal recommendations by their nature are as value-laden as the teacher or principal making the recommendation. There is the potential for student influence and inaccurate assessment. School reports, too, may be imperfect measures of university aptitude.

Existing research is mixed about the effectiveness of personal recommendations as predictors of academic success. For universities, longitudinal research and careful institutional analysis will be required to monitor the academic effect of new pathways.

School recommendations are also limited in scope. An entry scheme cannot by itself redress the multiple barriers to participation faced by low-SES students. School recommendations will work only if universities are actively involved in the partner schools, shaping curriculum, adding educational value, and raising awareness.

Worse, school recommendation schemes may exacerbate sectoral inequities. Already, there are significant differences emerging in entry schemes. Some universities still require participating students to reach minimum ATAR standards while others provide an offer irrespective of the rank received. Some universities allow students into a broad range of courses, while others limit recommended students to a narrow range of generalist courses. Scholarships and other financial incentives also vary markedly by institution.

Increased diversity is laudable, but the reality is many of these marriages are arranged. Geography dictates choice and the partner schools of most universities are those situated within their natural catchment.

If universities offer entry schemes of differing depth and quality, there will be confusion among secondary students and parents but also potentially a new arena of disadvantage. Schools will increasingly seek influence over the entry of their disadvantaged students to university, but this influence will be determined by their own location, size and demography. Some schools will find themselves with a full dance card; others will be circling the floor alone.

The greater fallout will be on students. Early university offer schemes usually depend on school attended, over which many students have little choice. Low-SES students, who are the target of most entry schemes, are minors whose parents often have relatively little mobility. These students may attend a school that is designated low-SES and therefore has a university partner and generous entry scheme but, paradoxically, a cohort of relatively advantaged disadvantaged students may arise.

State governments are already concerned about unequal levels of access. Some are formally attempting to divide their territory to ensure no school is left without a university partner.

Others are trying to bring state-based universities together in a spirit of collaboration around under-represented students. Coordination may mitigate inequities of the new landscape, but pragmatic institutions will still develop different entry pathways with their partner schools.

The ATAR system is gradually being replaced by selective entry schemes in an imperfect market. In this environment, sectoral tensions between competition and collaboration are only likely to increase.

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