Swinburne University is ditching the ATAR requirement for 2021, but experts are torn over the 'narrow and flawed predictor' of success

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Swinburne University is providing an early entry program for Year 12 students that doesn’t require an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

The university’s new program comes as the coronavirus pandemic disrupts normal class routines.

Higher education experts explain the pros and cons of the ATAR system, with some arguing it could be ditched for good.

The coronavirus may have killed off the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) if only for a year. Swinburne University of Technology has become the latest to ditch the ATAR requirement for several Bachelor’s degrees in its 2021 early entry program.

The Sydney-based institution will instead let graduating 12 students get into several Bachelor’s degree courses based on other criteria, after the coronavirus pandemic disrupted high school students’ studies and exams this year.
The decision has put the ATAR system under the microscope, as experts debate its usefulness in the first place.

The ATAR is used by universities to help them pick students for their courses. However, unis can also look at other criteria like a personal statement, a portfolio of work or an interview as well to guide their admission decision.

Rather than looking at their ATAR, Swinburne’s early entry program will require students to finish Year 12, get a recommendation from their high school and meet minimum English requirements.

The program will apply to its Bachelor of Arts, Business, Health Sciences and Design courses, with Swinburne in discussions with high schools and the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) to get the program underway.

Year 12 graduates applying for standard entry into a degree, however, the ATAR will still be used.

“We know that students in 2020 continue to rise to the occasion and achieve exceptional results, and that completion of VCE remains of utmost importance,” Swinburne University Pro-Vice-Chancellor Chris Pilgrim, said in a statement.

“But we also understand it has been a unique year of study for many and we want to support students to continue their studies into 2021.”

Swinburne joins other universities that are offering alternative entry requirements following the coronavirus pandemic. According to The Sydney Morning Herald, Macquarie University and the Australian National University will be accepting students next year based on their Year 11 results.

A “narrow and flawed predictor of achievement”

Experts remain divided on the academic scoring system.

Ian Marshmann, Honorary Principal Fellow at the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, told Business Insider Australia via email the ATAR is based on academic achievement and particularly suited to courses with a high demand for places from Year 12 students.

“It has been shown over the years to be one of the most reliable predictors of success in university study,” he said. “It may not take full account of other non-academic achievements or individual capabilities that might be appropriate to take into account for the purposes of assessing potential to succeed within a particular course.”

However, others like Associate Professor Andrew Harvey, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University, described the ATAR as a “narrow and flawed predictor of achievement” which also “distorts educational decisions.”

“The system drives many students to choose school subjects to maximise their ATAR, and then drives most students to ‘spend’ their ATAR at university,” he told Business Insider Australia via email. “Students are thus often choosing school subjects and university courses that are not of most interest to them.”

Are ATAR alternatives the answer?

Marshman said some universities have been using entry requirements other than the ATAR for many of their courses, which can benefit students in the long term.
“Within the Group of Eight universities, ANU has also signalled that it will no longer rely on the ATAR as the basis for entry into its courses,” he said.

“Relying on criteria other than the ATAR can be significantly more resource-intensive for individual universities although if the selection process is more suited to the particular course it is likely to lead to increased student success and retention levels in subsequent years.”

But Harvey believes many ATAR alternatives are just as flawed and could “lower the academic bar”.

“Using Year 11 marks is understandable, but can be unfair and also demotivating for Year 12 students,” Harvey added. “Principal [or] school recommendation schemes are often biased against under-represented students, labour intensive, and can have low predictive validity.”

Harvey added that interview and portfolio entry requirements “are also usually biased against under-represented students” as well as labour intensive, with some exceptions like the Big Picture Education program where students take on a number of internships between Year 9 and Year 12.

For Harvey, the main problem is the “ongoing disconnect” between the school and university curriculum. He points out that La Trobe University is providing two new entry pathways in the second semester that aren’t based on an ATAR but on academic achievement.

“These are dual enrolment models, where students undertake both school and university-approved curriculum,” Harvey said. “By our data analysis, these models are better predictors of university performance than ATAR, and this aspect is critical.”

Should the ATAR be scrapped completely?

Marshman believes it is up to universities to decide whether or not to use the ATAR system. “COVID-19 is not necessarily the determinant in decision-making around the use of ATARs,” he pointed out.

Harvey, on the other hand, said the ATAR is unlikely to go away completely unless most selective universities and courses are happy with an equally rigorous academic alternative.

What he suggested was a way of measuring a student’s achievement beyond the ATAR and recognise their contributions to society.

“Many students serve their communities, care for family members, and are active citizens,” he said. “Universities need to reward these contributions at enrolment.”