La Trobe breaks down the barriers to university entry

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The barrier between year 12 and higher education has been blurred by La Trobe University which has created two new options for school students wanting to try out university, driven in part by what it says are limitations of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank.

Professor Jessica Vanderlelie: "What I would love to see is that students who come to uni are the ones that want to be there." Louise Kennerley

Universities in most states have programs allowing year 12 students to study one or two first-year classes.

But Victorian Certificate of Education students who perform better in La Trobe's preliminary classes than they do in their ATAR will be able to convert the result into an ATAR to get formal university admission.

That makes the scheme different to "try-before-you-buy" courses at other universities which entice year 12 students into higher education but do not offer credit for admission.

Students doing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning - which normally steers people to a skills-sector job - can get ATAR-equivalence by completing a number of micro-subjects from La Trobe’s online Tertiary Preparation Program, in case they ultimately decide they want to go to university.
La Trobe deputy vice chancellor Jessica Vanderlelie said traditional pathways into university had shortcomings.

"ATAR is not the best predictor of university success. Doing an actual subject is the best predictor. "Students sometimes come to us with an ATAR of 50 and go on to be high achieving. Some of them arrive with an ATAR of 98 and struggle. 

"It's even more challenging now when you add mental health and COVID or higher university fees for some students."

She said many VCE students do not respond well to the pressure of their studies: "I can't handle the assessment" is one of the complaints she most frequently hears.

Meanwhile, VCAL students are often "counselling out" of higher education despite those who do go to university often doing very well.

Professor Vanderlelie said LaTrobe was not prejudging what people wanted to do but it wanted them to make a well-informed choice between study, training, or going straight into the workforce.

It wanted students to use such courses as a taste-tester so that if they go to training or the workforce, they feel able to switch into university at a later stage to upgrade their skills.

"Students can study free of charge and get a credit. They're reducing risk. These courses allow a student to pick up a subject in a discipline they were unfamiliar with and decide whether it works for them. Or might down the track."

Eligible subjects are run in the second semester and during the summer holidays.

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