I’d prefer to do something I love': Top students shun law, medicine

By Henrietta Cook
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Students with high ATARs are always asked the same, predictable question. “Why don’t you study law or medicine?”

For Mitchell Jarrett, this question arrived in Year 12 when it became obvious the teenager was going to do well.

Mitchell Jarrett, 17, said mechanical engineering appeals to him because it is constantly evolving.

“There were mates around that were saying, ‘why don’t you do something that is more prestigious like law and medicine?’”

Despite achieving an ATAR of 96.25, Mitchell has enrolled in mechanical engineering (honours) at RMIT University, a degree with a median ATAR of 80.9. Inspired by Elon Musk, the 17-year-old said mechanical engineering appeals to him because it's a field that's constantly evolving.

“I’m going to be doing something I want to do,” he said.

High-achieving students often feel pressured to pursue well-paying, sought-after careers and “not waste” their ATARs.

But for the first time, data released by the state’s admission centre sheds light on the high-achievers bucking this trend.

These students are pursuing their dreams and enrolling in courses that require lower ATARs.

Clearly-in ATARs are no longer published, with this year’s data instead revealing the highest, lowest and median ATAR for every Victorian university course.
Tiffany Nichols knew from a young age that she wanted to pursue a career that was creative.

Tiffany Nichols achieved an impressive ATAR of 99.5 and has chosen to study design at Monash University, a course with a median ATAR of 76.5.

The 18-year-old, who graduated from Lauriston Girls’ School last year, said she knew from a very young age that she wanted to pursue a career in design or art.

“I loved drawing and making things,” she recalled. “I used to have diaries and would draw the randomest sketches. I’ve had that creative outlet from a young age.”

During high school, a lot of people told Tiffany she could do anything she wanted, including law and medicine. They told her to keep her options open.

“But I knew design was what I wanted,” she said. “I didn’t let any ATAR stand in the way of doing what I wanted.”

She also brushed off questions from her peers about why she was studying so hard when she only needed an ATAR of 75 to get into her dream course.

“They said, ‘the ATAR for your course is so low you don't need to work so hard.’”

Tiffany said she dedicated herself to VCE because she wanted to be proud of her results, and see how far she could go.

“For some people, medicine is their dream,” she said. “I’d prefer to do something I love.”

Research by La Trobe University's higher education expert Andrew Harvey found 70 per cent of students choose a course that's within 2 to 3 points of their ATAR.

“Very few students choose to ‘waste’ their ATARs,” Dr Harvey said.

The research also explored the intense psychological pressures placed on students to "spend" their ATARs.

It found one-third of Victorian school leavers with an ATAR of 98 or above applied to study medicine at Monash University.
“While it seems entirely rational that people would spend their ATAR, it leads to all sorts of mistaken career choices,” he said.

According to Victoria University deputy vice-chancellor Marcia Devlin, these poor choices are fuelling anxiety and can lead to students dropping out of university courses they never wanted to study.

“There are so many people studying things they aren’t interested in,” professor Devlin said.

“This is partly due to the pressures on students and the status of going to a certain university or the status of doing a particular course.”

She said people should study what they are interested in.

“If you are studying something your heart is not in, it’s very difficult to retain the information ... then you set up the rest of your life for a job you don’t really enjoy.”

La Trobe University student Claire Mawley said she's always wanted to be a teacher.
When Claire Mawley starts her Bachelor of Secondary Education at La Trobe University’s Bendigo campus this year, she will be the top student in her class.

The Kyabram teenager and former St Augustine’s College student achieved an ATAR of 93.2 but has enrolled in a university degree with a median ATAR of 69.10.

“I’m extremely passionate about guiding young people to become contributing members of society,” she said.

While Claire has the marks to pursue a career in law, she said it wasn’t for her.

“You can do law but you may not have the drive and passion to be a good lawyer,” she said.

“I have wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember.”