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Degree of flexibility assists uni offers

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Illustration: Igor Saktor *Source:* Supplied

THE relationship between tertiary rankings and wealth is widely known. And if the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank remains the primary method of university selection, under-represented students will remain exactly that.

To counter this problem, universities are trying to move the age of assent. Some universities are trying to skip class by bringing forward the age of recruitment, others by pushing it back.

In the former case, institutions are providing early offers to disadvantaged school students in order to diminish the influence of ATAR. Universities such as RMIT, La Trobe and University of New England all administer schemes which provide conditional or guaranteed offers to disadvantaged Year 12 students before the completion of their final exams. The University of Western Australia provides even earlier conditional offers to Year 11 students. These offers are subject to a number of conditions such as satisfactory performance in Year 12, which itself includes participation in a residential summer school and university

mentoring. Nevertheless, the university selection process will increasingly begin before the start of Year 12.

Early offers raise several ethical questions. How early is too early for recruitment? Could conditional offers be provided to disadvantaged students in Year 10 or perhaps even earlier, impacting directly on the subject choices of these students? When does raising awareness become active recruitment, and what are the broader implications of providing university offers to relatively young school students?

By contrast, some universities are seeking to promote access to disadvantaged students by delaying the age of recruitment into selective courses. A growing trend exists towards generalist undergraduate degrees and common first-year programs. These models enable highly selective and professional pathway courses to base their selection criteria on university rather than school achievement. Evidence suggests students from poorer families perform relatively well once at university. By pushing back the age of recruitment, institutions such as Melbourne University argue that disadvantaged students are more likely to be afforded access to the highly selective courses.

This is a key issue. While enrolments of financially disadvantaged students have risen overall in recent years, this cohort remains seriously under-represented in selective courses such as law and medicine. The creation of common first-year programs at universities such as La Trobe enables disadvantaged students with limited ATARs to access highly selective courses at second year.

Universities such as Melbourne and University of Western Australia are moving professional degrees even further back to postgraduate level. Very few students in these institutions will be recruited into such courses below the age of 20. Of course, the pipeline effect also means that equity objectives will only be met if the undergraduate cohort itself includes substantial numbers of disadvantaged students.

Where might delayed selection take us? One scenario is for a university to open its doors to any student who successfully completes Year 12, and run a generalist first year in liberal arts or equivalent. Students could subsequently be selected into specialist courses after first year on the basis of their university achievement.

Aligned to this system would be a sophisticated early warning system and various remedial enabling programs to mitigate against potential attrition. The reputational issue of reducing ATARs would in a sense be avoided because there would simply be no ATAR requirements. The administrative burden would also be low because all first-year students are currently graded anyway.

Pending a courageous decision of Yes Minister proportions, such a scenario seems highly unlikely. Reputations remain paramount, and universities will continue to go around rather than through ATAR. Nevertheless, the looming landscape is one in which alternative selection will intensify. Youth and maturity will both be targeted. The recognised age of disadvantage will no longer be 17, but rather anywhere from 14 to 22, excluding the traditional mature age cohort. Predictive validity, transparency, fairness, and administrative efficiency will be the practical concerns of alternative selection strategies.

Less well known are the broader consequences of selecting students at different ages and stages of life in the name of equity.

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