

Originally published in *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/should-we-scrap-the-atar-what-are-the-alternative-options-experts-comment-55501>

Should we scrap the ATAR? What are the alternative options? Experts comment

March 3, 2016 6.02am AEDT

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Disclosure statement

Andrew Harvey receives funding from the Australian Government Department of Education through the National Priorities Pool, to lead a research project on The Adaptation of Australian Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity.

Gabrielle Matters co-led with Geoff Masters a 12-month review into the assessment and tertiary entrance processes for ACER which was funded by the Newman through a public tender process.

Tim Pitman receives funding from The Australian Government Department of Education and Training to lead a research project on the use of Enabling Programs as an alternative pathway to higher education studies.

Andrew Norton does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Partners



[Victoria State Government](#) provides funding as a strategic partner of The Conversation AU.



[Curtin University](#) and [La Trobe University](#) provide funding as members of The Conversation AU.

The value of the ATAR is being called into question. Many Australian vice-chancellors have urged for the university admission system to be [scrapped](#), saying it's "[meaningless](#)" and "[too simplistic](#)".

Universities set an ATAR cut-off according to what they believe is the minimum academic standard required to complete a course. But a [Fairfax Media investigation](#) revealed that some universities were selecting students with much lower ATARs than required – as low as 30 in some cases – raising questions about the ethics behind enrolling students with such low scores.

But is scrapping the ATAR the answer? Does it really penalise disadvantaged students? And what are the alternative options? The Conversation speaks to experts from across the sector to debate how best to select students.

The ATAR system is efficient but doesn't highlight students' full potential

Andrew Harvey, director of access and achievement research unit, La Trobe University

Admissions processes typically aim to meet four principles: efficiency, transparency, equity, and [predictive validity](#). The main advantage of ATAR is its efficiency. For courses of high demand, sorting rankings is a lot quicker than sifting through hundreds of portfolios or interviews.

ATAR itself is fairly transparent, but universities game the system by publishing a high ATAR cut-off and then [accepting many students on different criteria](#). The equity of ATAR is limited, with a well-known bias towards high socio-economic students. Subject selections and weightings influence the ranks in ways that many students do not understand.

Finally, ATAR is a moderately good predictor of success, particularly at the extremes. However, many students have potential not captured in the rank, and many outperform their rank once at university.

Alternative admissions schemes are growing rapidly. Notably, several universities now provide early offers to school students based on principal recommendations. While such schemes often appear more equitable in isolation, there is a risk to efficiency and transparency at a system level.

Students and their parents now have to navigate multiple admissions schemes at multiple universities. Reform needs to focus on the students rather than just the institutions.

There is little evidence to suggest that a more flexible model is more reliable than ATAR

Andrew Norton, higher education program director, Grattan Institute

In the US, school leavers often need much more than their school results when applying for university. Many sit [standardised admission tests](#) and submit personal statements to multiple universities.

In Australia, students can apply for [many courses](#) at once using [ATAR](#), which just re-uses school results. It's a very efficient system for students and universities, if it selects well. At the higher levels, ATAR [robustly predicts](#) course completion. Less than 10% of 90+ ATAR students drop out.

Auditions and specialised aptitude tests are sometimes used, but 95% of 90+ ATAR students are admitted based on secondary school results (which can include more than ATAR).

ATAR can under-state a student's true potential. But history suggests that for people with ATARs below 60, [four or more](#) of every 10 don't complete.

Universities are offering alternatives to ATAR, from [admissions tests](#) to [including personal characteristics](#) in admission decisions. About 30% of under-60 ATAR students are admitted based on something other than secondary education.

Unfortunately, universities rarely provide evidence that these alternatives predict success more reliably than ATAR. The [higher education regulator](#) needs to check that universities are genuinely helping students make good post-school choices.



ATAR can under-state a student's true potential. from www.shutterstock.com

Grades for subject areas should replace a single overall score

Gabrielle Matters, principal research fellow, ACER

The construction of a single rank order of all students seeking entry to a university course is a peculiarly Australian practice.

Universities around the world use students' senior secondary results in their selection processes rather than attempting to construct a single ranking (such as ATAR) that is devised from the combining subject results.

[Research by ACER](#) argued that a ranking that masks performance in specific subjects should not be used for all applicants for all courses.

Rather, students should be selected on the basis of evidence relevant to individual courses (including the possibility of specifying prerequisites and giving preferential weighting to results in subjects or particular relevance to a university course).

ACER recommended that the universities get students' results on a fine scale (not ABC like the middle of last century but 1 to 60) and universities use these rather than a general measure like the ATAR. The universities could then look at results in specific subjects that match the demands of a particular course.

For high-demand courses, universities could produce a simple ranking of applicants, rankings tailored to the nature of the course. For example if only three subjects, English, high-level mathematics and physics were required for engineering, students who applied to enter engineering would be ranked on the basis of their three subject scores (from 180 to 0).

Scrapping the ATAR would improve equality in universities

Tim Pitman, researcher at Curtin University

Scrapping the ATAR could be an important step towards ensuring that both the quality and equality of our higher education sector is improved. The use of any single test, number or calculation as a definitive measurement of academic readiness, or merit, is fundamentally flawed.

The trap to avoid would be searching for a “superior” replacement – as in just one or even a preferred one - but to use a wide range of diagnostic tools to select students.

What counts as fairer depends on the particular course, plus how much competition and how many places are available, plus social agendas of trying to target particular students.

Ultimately, however, the answer to the question “what is the best way of selecting students?” does not lie in more precise assessment by the universities, but in delivering higher-quality

education on a needs basis in the primary and secondary years. This was a fundamental message delivered in the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling (aka the Gonski).

Another was that until a society has equality of education at the compulsory level, there will be continued need to provide some form of special access to higher education for specific groups of disadvantaged students.