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Re-thinking Teaching and Learning at Luther College

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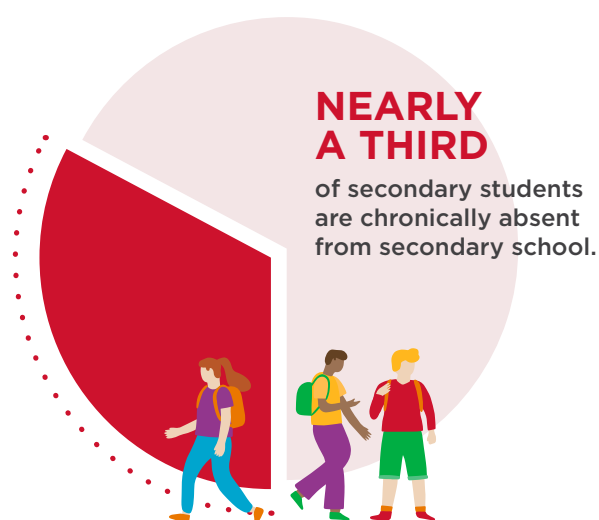
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The ATAR is becoming obsolete, or at best, optional

A good friend recently asked my ten year old daughter what she 'wanted to be when she grew up', and I nearly fell off my chair. Not only was I shocked by the nature of the question – what on earth does a ten-year-old know about her future pathway, in any complexity? But also, as a teacher, my first reaction was to consider what her VCE might look like first, as this will ultimately be the travelator into the life of post-school Future-Ruby. Either way, it was not a comfortable thing to consider. Really, there is a lot to be uncomfortable with in the world of the VCE at this point in time, as much discourse has been had in attempting to rectify this deficit in the 2019 statistics which indicated:



[Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015), *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.]



[Australian Government, Productivity Commission. (2019). *Report on Government Services 2019.*]

O'Connell, M. et al, (2019) *Beyond ATAR: A Proposal for Change.*

Five short years ago, the statistics showed that almost a third of all secondary students fail to attend the required number of scheduled classes, with one in five not completing VCE nation-wide. Whilst this figure does vary rather drastically depending on things such as location, social demographic and family aspiration, this data is nonetheless troubling. What's more, these indicators were set to discombobulate completely during our COVID years and now beyond, with the backlash of these inconsistent stretches in time in the physical classroom being felt in ripples still to this day. COVID lockdowns aside, as educators we must look at this data and ask ourselves: what are we doing wrong? And how can we improve the secondary school experience for our students each and every day?

When the system presents to the learner as lacking relevance, or students approach their education with disinterest, this absence of direction can sometimes creep into those post school years, with 'nearly twelve percent of (Australian)

young people...not engaged in employment or education,' (O'Connell, M., et. al. 2019). Put simply, this leads to the following startling truth, that:



[Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015), *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.]

[Foundation for Young Australians. (2018). *The New Work Reality*. Retrieved from www.fya.org.au.]

O'Connell, M. et al, (2019) *Beyond ATAR: A Proposal for Change*.

The secondary school sector cannot ignore these statistics, because the research typically shows that students' engagement with their learning follows a downward trajectory the longer that they are part of the system. By nature, primary school students are keen to learn and are interested in trying new things. As the years progress, however, and the trials and pressures of senior school and then VCE make the daily reality of school sometimes rigid, school attendance tends to decline (ACARA, 2023). Whilst some of this can be attributed to students following early post-school pathways such as a vocation, there is something else broiling under the surface here. Many educators believe this decline can be attributed to the oppressive structure of the VCE and the ATAR ranking, as students feel overwhelmed by the thought of this One Final Number which is set to define their life and their outcomes. They feel the pressure of this expectation, which weighs heavily upon their 17 and 18 year old shoulders, and this discontent sometimes continues into university, as shown by increasing drop-out rates (Joseph, R. 2023). Whilst this can be attributed to the course not matching the students' expectations, or learners struggling with the self-directed nature of University teaching, it is now time to question the efficacy of the ATAR system as a means for sorting school leavers.

Tertiary institutions are acknowledging the deficit and in fact, have been working diligently for many years at providing alternatives to this perhaps obsolete framework for ordering and ranking students nationwide. Some Universities have the capacity to offer early entry to high performing Year 11 students in the first few months of their Year 12 study, which does fundamentally take the pressure off those individuals, but the pitfalls in this system are two-fold. Firstly, these offers rely on individual students researching their courses early and being made aware that they have the capacity to enrol pre Year 12, which is something that many will not investigate during Year 11. And secondly, this also relies on the student staying focused on this select pathway and not changing their preferences over the course of their Year 12 study, which is sometimes a hard track to follow. To mitigate these complexities, Universities are developing alternatives, such as the 'Next Gen' assessments addressed in this paper, and the school system now must catch up with their ideology.

'Next Gen' outcomes the potential alternative to ATAR

Sandra Milligan, of the Melbourne University's Faculty of Education, has coined this metamorphosis as being the 'decay in the ATAR', and as a member of a tertiary facility, she and her team have been researching ways in which to address this 'problem of practice', (Milligan, S., 2023). Interestingly, Milligan does not suggest that we work on ways to improve our student attitude to ATAR, but she and her colleagues have been building capacity around producing alternatives. This ATAR measure of success will, in a few short months or years, have the potential to be considered at best optional, or alternatively, be rendered completely obsolete as a processing measure to be used as students transition into their post-school pathways.

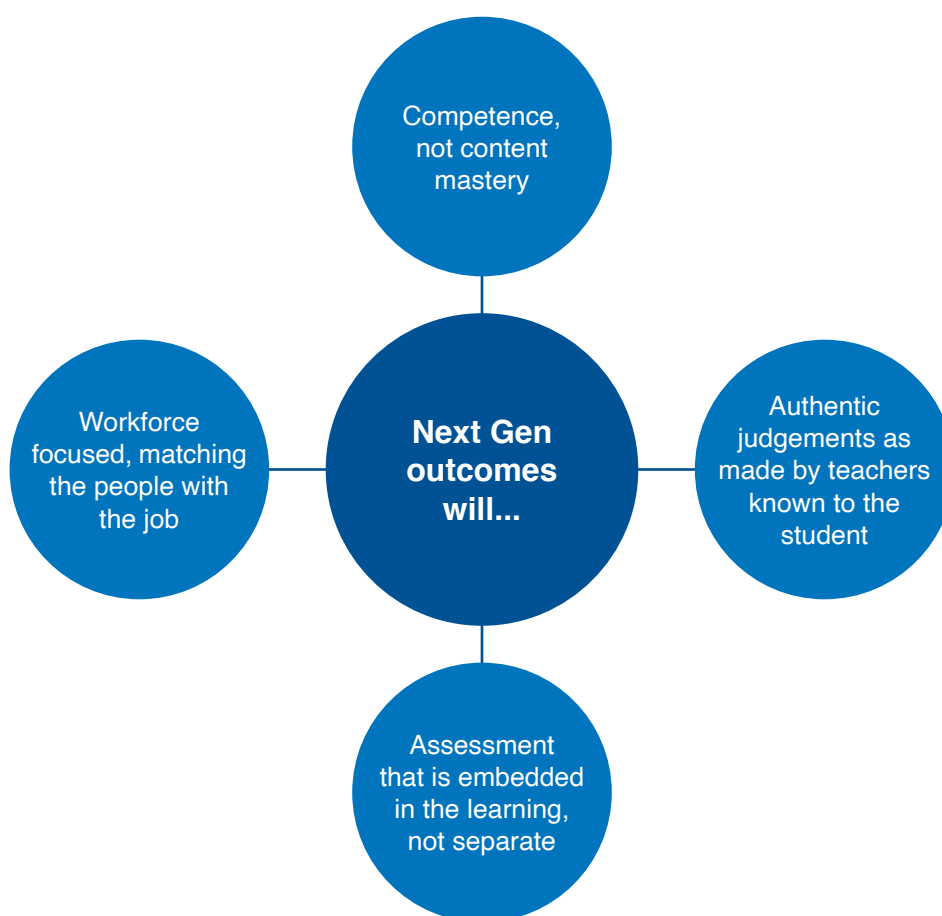
Much conversation is being had in educational and research facilities, with Luther College's Acting Director of Teaching and Learning, Simone Boland acknowledging that the ATAR is merely, 'a blunt measure of success and accomplishment'. Boland firmly asserts that, 'at Luther, we see our students as individuals and rounded human beings, (they are) seen holistically – a number does not do that'. To counteract this deficit, Boland and her colleagues are working to consider substitutions which have been supported by the Melbourne Assessment Community and address ways in which to 'profile' students based on a broad range of strengths, (Milligan, S., 2024). These competencies are workplace focused and are designed to match student interests and skill sets with potential courses, rather than defining these applications simply by using the single ATAR number. Luther College's Simone Boland believes that this change would be nothing short of revolutionary for young people Australia wide, and that this transformation would sit well with 'our purpose as a school and our core values' here at Luther, as 'we want to develop our young people with all their special gifts, to go out into the world prepared for life with all its exciting possibilities and complexities. This means equipping them with the skills, competencies and experiences that will fuel resilience and problem-solving - an ability to take on life's challenges - the social networks that can support and empower them and the confidence and belief that when they put their mind to it, anything is possible. None of this is found in a number', (Boland, S., 2024). In short, this new approach to measuring student success is attempting to ensure that young people must:

- 1 Know how to learn and have their personal attributes showcased**
- 2 Have their social and interpersonal skills developed**
- 3 Be purposeful and meaningful in their chosen direction**
- 4 Celebrate thinking as a means for guiding action**

Rhiannon Ward, *adapted from Melbourne Assessment Community, 2024*

When students know how they learn and are able to recognise their personal strengths, this autonomy can have profound influence over their successes both inside and outside of the classroom. The ATAR, however, is often criticised as forcing students to forego their interests and their natural strengths in the face of needing to boost their individual study scores. However, if we agree that a single ranking cannot be responsible for determining who will or will not make a good doctor, or teacher, or nurse, what is the better gauge?

The answer lies in alternative measures of success, and here we are referring to them as ‘Next Gen’ outcomes to supersede the almost outdated ATAR. This innovative approach to measuring student achievement will consider:



Rhiannon Ward, *adapted from Melbourne Assessment Community, 2024*

When students are given the opportunity to be considered based on their virtues and interests, rather than simply the number that defines their success, we are opening up a broad range of human potential for them. Students have oft complained that school feels like a curious distinction from the rest of their lives and their interests, that it stifles who ‘they really are and what they need to do to be part of the learning community of the school’ (O’Connell, M., 2019). Their interests and natural talents are not necessarily catered for in the neat boxes offered by secondary schools, and as such they feel a disconnect between the two. This misalignment can potentially be attributed to student disengagement, and those startling statistics that indicate one in five students enrolled in secondary school do not in fact finish. The ‘one size fits all’ approach to school is firmly being redeveloped, and one of the most powerful refinements here may be for marking out student agency, empowering young people to take firm hold of the drivers’ seat in their own journey, in order to provide them a strong way forward.

Student Agency is the way of the future

The cornerstone of this ‘Next Gen’ evolution is indeed learner advocacy, or the capacity for students to take charge of their own pathway earlier and with greater clarity. Advocacy by nature is an integral part of knowing who we are and how we function in our world; being able to understand our strengths and promote ourselves in order to showcase these strengths and interests is crucial to our human belonging. Surely success should be measured with a more holistic approach than the single ATAR figure, to include the opportunity to uncover personal interests and attributes to the learning experience? Furthermore, these attributes or capabilities have the potential to form part of a students’ assessment profile, and these ‘learner profiles’, or ‘capability reports’, have the capacity to provide a more balanced and targeted review of a students’ skill set and natural abilities profile than the basic ATAR figure does.

These reports will look very similar to other nationally benchmarked assessments such as NAPLAN, in that visually they provide learners with a pin wheel of colours, connected to attributes that showcase the individual's particular interests, strengths and capabilities. An example can be seen below, with the strongest colours indicating the strongest natural capabilities of that learner:



O'Connell, M. et al, (2019) *Beyond ATAR: A Proposal for Change*.

The premise behind the capabilities report is that all teaching staff who mentor a student have been required to complete a questionnaire series, that is then used to generate this visual interpretation. These teachers hold a personal relationship to individual students, and hence the thinking is that they are better equipped to form a judgement about that person than would a subjective test or measure of their aptitude. Really, these 'Next Gen' assessments are reverting to a very human way to quantify success; the human relationship between student and teacher is important, and it is valued, and will certainly be accredited for improved student outcomes.

Another factor here is that on a broad level, students as whole people live and breathe the life of a school for the years that they spend inside its' walls. They embody the philosophy of the school community, they are part of programs that develop their wellbeing, or their cross-age relationships, or their external connections, and as such, school leadership is also well placed to comment upon a students' success. There is capacity, in this 'Next Gen' world, for school Principals or other members of the Executive to contribute their insight into a students' skill set, which works to boost the capability of that learner's profile within their community. These profiles are also agile, in that they have the potential to offer students micro-credentials by 'badging' them with a skill set, to show future employers or tertiary institutions the myriad talents the learner has accomplished. These may be showcased via an e-portfolio, which can be built over time and grow in complexity and diversity. This varied suite will hopefully open pathways and provide learners with the chance to match their interests with their post school journeys and appropriate courses of study. Ultimately, the goal is to give focus to a student's skill set and match this to a professional profile, rather than the other way around.

In summary:

The key components of this ATAR revolution are as follows:

As the ATAR transitions to obsolescence, much consideration has been given to its' next iteration. The Melbourne Assessment Community believes that the 'decay in the ATAR', (Milligan, 2024), is due in part to the lack of relevance. A final number does not indicate how well a student is suited to a particular profession or vocation, and already some tertiary institutions offer early entry places to high performing Year 11 students during their first few months of Year 12.

The 'Next Gen' iteration of assessment is at its' advent, and will allow students greater autonomy over their learning experience and direction. This reinvented way of measuring students will allow competencies to be showcased with the view that these attributes are a better indicator of a student's likelihood of success with a particular tertiary pathway. These 'capability reports' will be completed by all teachers who mentor an individual student, and school leaders also have the potential for input, in order to provide a more complete picture of each individual student.

And finally, learner agency is the way of the future, as students will have their credentials aligned with their interest, and in turn impact the course that they may take on board for their future. Fundamentally, this new way of measuring success is a student centred, human approach to the experience of teaching and learning, and it is an exciting pathway for us to follow.

And so, it is with some relief that I can pause, breathe out and consider that the VCE world of the future is set to be very different to the VCE world of today. My ten-year-old Future-Ruby will likely have her strengths mapped out as capabilities rather than measured as numerical figures. In turn, this will likely mean that her teachers and mentors at secondary school will have the capacity to place their judgements about her strengths and challenges, and have these qualities marked as visual representations of her success. And ultimately, her personal wishes and interests will powerfully be taken on board and produce the anchor point for her post-school direction. Her profile will be measured as skills rather than numbers, her credentials be measured in the micro rather than the macro, and her post school studies will ultimately be tailored to her interests, strengths and capabilities, rather than her one and final ATAR number. What a positive and remarkable change for us to witness, steer and own as secondary school educators in the year 2024.

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