

### Submission No. 3

Dear Sirs,

We have been researching community attitudes to the ATAR system and found enormous support for your respective views as expressed in The Sydney Morning Herald (January 27, 2016: *Let's move beyond ATARs*) and on ABC Radio National Breakfast (Thursday April 7, 2016).

We believe that the current discussion about universities admitting students below their advertised ATAR is a distraction from a more fundamental issue, namely the effectiveness of ATAR's both as a measure of academic achievement and as a means of predicting a student's future success.

We consider that the ATAR approach is flawed for students, schools and universities.

Schools blame universities for the policy while exploiting ATAR's to advertise the success of their institution. Simultaneously, they recognize the stress induced in students within their institution. Regrettably, the latter often takes second place and student mental health is the casualty that has not been widely highlighted or fully costed in evaluating the ATAR system.

The emerging trend of universities ignoring ATAR's, we consider proof in itself that the system does not work and the possibility that the single number ATAR may not reflect aptitude is widely understood among the school community. There appears to be widespread support for them being relegated in the selection process, something politicians do not seem to appreciate yet.

It is our view that much could be done to improve the ATAR system if school communities and universities combined forces and actively participated in the debate. Now would be an ideal time to do this. Reports of a national university entrance scheme seem to have been interpreted by Minister Simon Birmingham as a more rigid ATAR system. If, however, ATAR numbers are a flawed measure of long-term aptitude, this would only serve to exacerbate current problems.

I attach a draft of an email sent last month to Assistant Treasurer Kelly O'Dwyer, outlining the case we have developed, looking at the ATAR problem from the perspective of, school students, teachers and parents. In her reply (copied below our email) she advised that she had forwarded the email on to the Minister for Education.

We are uncovering universal support for the notion of the autonomy and transparency (as advocated in the RN Breakfast discussion with Fran Kelly) without the reductive ATAR measure (as per the SMH article, *'Let's move beyond ATAR's'*). The general view we are encountering is that, if university medical faculties are already implementing other measures without impunity, why cant other faculties do the same, selecting and clearly publicizing the criteria used.

Even the apparent insistence on transparency is now being met with some cynicism in the light of the unique approach of medical faculties; how transparent can an interview ever be? The right of a faculty to do this is, however, accepted by the student community generally and, apparently, by politicians.

Anecdotally, there is now growing public acceptance of the need for a flexible approach based on trust in a level competence to allow exceptions to occur (similar to Sir Paul Nurse's journey through the fixed entrance requirements in the UK education system of the 1960's).

There is also growing support for lowering the public profile of individual test results. Students, parents and teachers do not widely favour the rigid, highly publicized results and cut-offs sought by politicians. Although much is being done to debunk Finland's status as a top nation in educating students more creatively it is, we believe significant that in Finland the scores arising from any testing are not published and publicly exploited as they are in Australia.

If schools and universities are sincere in simply wanting the best long-term match between students and courses then it may be that the published ATAR system works directly against this, adding unnecessary stress and leading students to make poor choices in 'not wasting their ATAR'. The use and presentation of ATAR results has not been as thoroughly examined and publicly debated as NAPLAN testing. Along with a re-examination of the spurious measure of the ATAR itself, altering the approach to the public presentation and exploitation of the results may be as important in achieving the goal of best matching students to courses.

Should it be of any help in generating further discussion to these ends, we would support and be happy to assist in any arrangements that bring all parties to the ATAR issue together to examine this important issue.

Regards,

Catherine Macaulay