



Pathways  
in Place  
Co-Creating Community Capabilities

# Policy Paper #1

**The impact of school streaming on growth and equity in Australian higher education: evidence from Queensland**

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## Introduction

The Australian Government has commissioned reviews of both the [schools](#) and [higher education](#) sectors, as well as an early childhood review. While noting the importance of each individual report, the Minister for Education has argued that ‘it’s how they knit together that has the potential to change the lives of people who aren’t even born yet.’ (Clare, 2023). Connecting the schools and higher education reviews is particularly important because university growth and equity targets are unachievable without substantial school reform. In this paper we highlight the scope and inequity of secondary school streaming, and its specific impact on student equity in Australian higher education. We focus here on Queensland data, with a more comprehensive national account to follow. Among other initiatives, increasing the proportion of low socio-economic status (SES) background, Indigenous, and other marginalised students requires systemic school reform.

The streaming of secondary school students, typically into ATAR and non-ATAR tracks, is prevalent across the country. Collectively, the non-ATAR tracks include different certificates as well as less formal groupings, almost all with a focus on vocational education, trades, and apprenticeships. In some states, nearly half of Year 12 students are enrolled in these non-ATAR tracks. This streaming exists in addition to the divisions between private/Catholic/public school type, and the International Baccalaureate which, while non-ATAR, includes provision for ATAR equivalence. The non-ATAR alternative pathways have been described as providing a ‘second chance’ for non-traditional students to participate in higher education (Diamond & O’Brien-Malone, 2018).

While the streaming of secondary students is designed to promote student choice and to increase Year 12 completion rates, many students are undertaking non-ATAR streams that represent essentially closed doors to higher education. This trend is highly visible in Queensland, where the tracking of Indigenous and low SES students into non-ATAR pathways is particularly glaring. In addition to school reform, data suggest a need for governments to encourage deeper university engagement with schools, especially in the provision of academic pathways for non-ATAR students. As the [Shergold](#) review also highlighted, further work is required to reduce the focus on ATAR itself and to increase equity and opportunity within the schools sector.

## Outline

We begin this report by outlining higher education participation rates nationally, and for Indigenous students specifically. We then present data showing the extent of non-ATAR streaming across Queensland, and the postsecondary outcomes of ATAR and non-ATAR students. Finally, we present specific data from Logan, an area of Brisbane which is the focus of our Pathways in Place program of community empowerment. Logan is proportionally the largest local government area in Australia for Māori and Pasifika residents, includes a substantial Indigenous population, and comprises a relatively high number of people from low SES backgrounds. Logan data reveal the strong correlations between ATAR, socio-economic

status, and university participation, and underline the need for deep and structural reform within both the schools and higher education sectors.

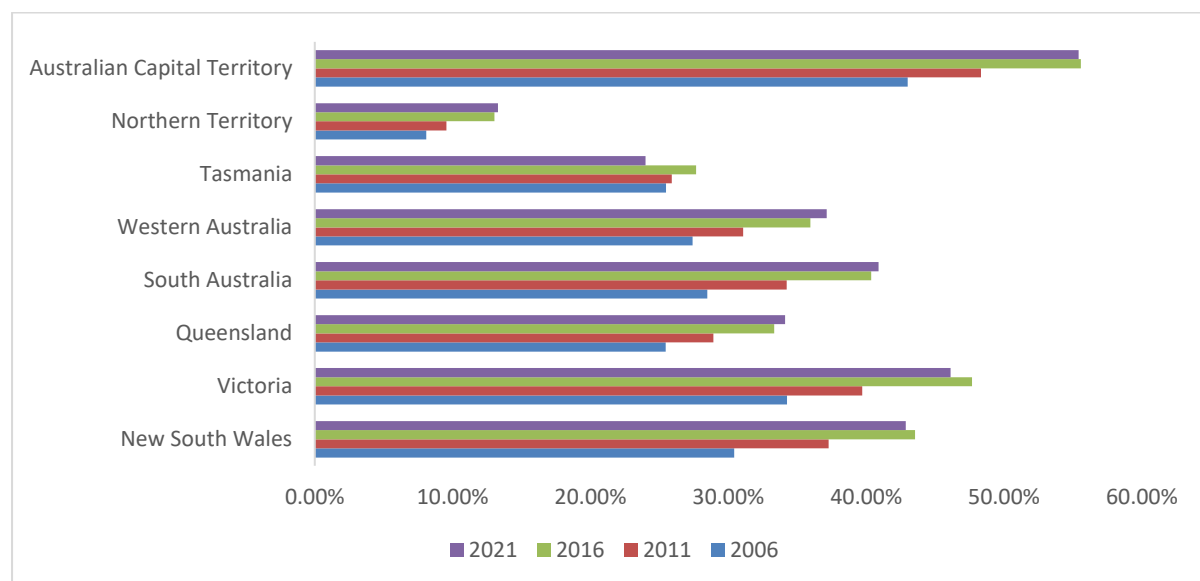
The majority of the data presented here is taken from the Next Steps Queensland Survey, a voluntary survey of Year 12 Completers taken 6 months after completing year 12. Some caution is required in the use of this data as the response rate varies year to year. In 2022, the response rate for the Next Steps survey for Indigenous students was 61.2% and 76.9% for all students. However, it remains the most comprehensive publicly available data set for the destinations of Year 12 completers in Queensland.

Summary data reveals that, within Queensland, approximately 42% of students undertake a non-ATAR track but this rises to 58% of students in the Logan area. Statewide, 75% of Indigenous students are in a non-ATAR stream, and only 5% of the overall non-ATAR cohort progress to higher education. These data help to explain the relatively low university participation and attainment of Queenslanders, and the specific equity participation gaps in higher education, many of which themselves flow from the earlier streaming of marginalised students in schools.

## Higher education participation rates by state and territory

The number of 20-year-olds engaged at university has dropped in most states between 2016 and 2021. In Queensland, 34% of 20-year-olds were enrolled at university in 2021, compared with 46% of Victorian 20-year-olds.

*Figure 1: Proportion of young people aged 20 who were currently enrolled in a university or other tertiary institution by state and year.*



Source: ABS Census, 2006, 2011, 2016 & 2021

## Indigenous higher education participation rates

In Queensland, 12% of all Indigenous 20-year-olds were engaged in higher education in 2021, compared with 20% of Victorian and 15% of New South Wales Indigenous 20-year-olds. Nationally, 34% of Australian 20-year-olds were enrolled in higher education. The data confirm the low participation of Queensland Indigenous people in higher education, both relative to the general Australian population and to Indigenous people in many other states and territories.

*Figure 2: Percentage of Indigenous 20-year-olds engaged in university or other higher education in 2021 by state compared with the general Australian population.*



Source: ABS Census, 2021

## Queensland postsecondary destinations

### Destinations of year 12 completers by ATAR status

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, non-ATAR tracks rarely lead directly to higher education. The Queensland Next Steps data clarifies this correlation. Table 1 disaggregates the destination of Queensland Year 12 completers by ATAR status for the year 2022. Only 5.2% of non-ATAR track students transition to study a Bachelor Degree, compared to 65% of ATAR track students. Importantly, these students are also four times more likely to be 'Not in Labor Force, Employment or Training' (NILFET) than ATAR track students (ABS census, 2021). Indeed, a non-ATAR completer is as likely to be NILFET as they are to be enrolled in a university degree.

Table 1: Next Steps responses for 2022 Year 12 completers by ATAR status

Next Steps QLD survey	2022	
Post-school destinations	ATAR	Non -ATAR
<b>In education and training</b>	<b>75.5</b>	<b>39.9</b>
Bachelor degree	65.1	5.2
<b>Certificates/Diplomas</b>		
Certificate IV or above	3.9	6.5
Certificate I-III	2.3	6.4
<b>Apprentice/Trainee</b>		
Apprentice	2.4	17.4
Trainee	1.7	4.3
<b>Not in education and training</b>		
<b>Employed</b>	<b>20.8</b>	<b>42.9</b>
Employed full-time	7.6	17.2
Employed part-time	13.2	25.7
Looking for work	2.5	12
NILFET	1.2	5.2
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>23,006</b>	<b>16,510</b>

Source: Qld Government, 2023

## Destination by ATAR status of Indigenous Year 12 completers

Table 2 disaggregates the destinations of Queensland Indigenous Year 12 completers by ATAR status. This table reveals that 74% of Indigenous respondents undertook non-ATAR track study in 2022 (1,335 of 1,799 completers). While many non-ATAR track respondents were in apprenticeships or employment, only 3.4% had transitioned to a Bachelor degree and the NILFET rate was also much higher (7.4%) than for ATAR track completers (1.7%). Overall, less than 16% of Indigenous Year 12 completers had transitioned to university, compared to 40% of non-Indigenous completers. Over 20% of Indigenous Year 12 completers were either looking for work or NILFET. Perhaps most strikingly, an Indigenous non-ATAR completer is more than twice as likely to be NILFET as enrolled in a university degree.

Table 2: Next Step responses - Destination by ATAR status of Indigenous Year 12 completers 2022

Main destination	ATAR		Non-ATAR		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Bachelor Degree	234	50.4%	46	3.4%	280	15.6%
VET Certificate IV+	22	4.7%	52	3.9%	74	4.1%
VET Certificate III	7	1.5%	48	3.6%	55	3.1%
VET Certificate I–II/other	11	2.4%	39	2.9%	50	2.8%
Apprenticeship	13	2.8%	156	11.7%	169	9.4%
Traineeship	16	3.4%	80	6.0%	96	5.3%
Full-time employment	46	9.9%	217	16.3%	263	14.6%
Part-time employment	89	19.2%	303	22.7%	392	21.8%
Seeking work	18	3.9%	295	22.1%	313	17.4%
NILFET	8	1.7%	99	7.4%	107	5.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>464</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>1,335</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>1,799</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Qld Government, custom request, 2023



## Logan postsecondary destinations

### Destination by ATAR status of Year 12 completers, Logan LGA 2022

Table 3 disaggregates the Next Steps data based on the Logan Local Government Area. The data confirm that only 42% of respondents in Logan received an ATAR in 2022, with the majority undertaking non-ATAR tracks instead. Logan data contrasts with Queensland overall, where 58% of completers receive an ATAR. Within Logan, of the majority who study non-ATAR tracks, only 6% transition to higher education, with over 20% seeking work or NILFET. Postsecondary outcomes remain consistently worse for non-ATAR track students than those on ATAR tracks. The extent of non-ATAR tracking also helps to explain the relatively low rates of higher education attainment in Logan. Only 20% of Logan residents aged between 25 and 34 years hold a Bachelor degree or higher compared to 32% statewide (ABS Census, 2021).

Table 3: Next Steps (Qld) survey data for Logan LGA Year 12 completers 2022

Main destination	ATAR		Non-ATAR		total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Bachelor Degree	713	59.8%	98	6.1%	811	28.9%
VET Certificate IV+	79	6.6%	143	8.8%	222	7.9%
VET Certificate III	13	1.1%	67	4.1%	80	2.8%
VET Certificate I–II/other	19	1.6%	43	2.7%	62	2.2%
Apprenticeship	32	2.7%	192	11.9%	224	8.0%
Traineeship	22	1.8%	63	3.9%	85	3.0%
Full-time employment	98	8.2%	277	17.1%	375	13.3%
Part-time employment	159	13.3%	393	24.3%	552	19.7%
Seeking work	38	3.2%	230	14.2%	268	9.5%
NILFET	19	1.6%	111	6.9%	130	4.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,192</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>1,617</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>2,809</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Source: Qld Government, 2023

## Conclusion

The streaming of students into non-ATAR tracks is designed to promote student choice and increase Year 12 completions. However, those on non-ATAR tracks rarely transition to higher education, and their outcomes are demonstrably worse than ATAR track completers. While this report has focused on Queensland data, the national picture reveals the same consequences of effectively developing a two-tier system of education (in addition to hierarchies of school type, funding, and curricula). The effects of streaming decisions typically made in Year 9 and 10 are both limiting and lasting, and disproportionately

affect low SES, Indigenous, Māori and Pasifika, and other marginalised students. Meeting the ambitious growth and equity targets in higher education will require reform of both schools and universities.

In the short term, there is need to increase postsecondary options for non-ATAR students, including development of tailored university curricula and pathways. Schools and systems could also be assessed not only by their Year 12 completion rates, but by the postsecondary outcomes of their students. Potential Accord reforms could also encourage universities to develop pathways and engagement with all school students, including those on non-ATAR tracks. More broadly, further interrogation is required of the purposes of streaming, the effectiveness of streaming in supporting student choice and producing positive outcomes, and the role of ATAR within both secondary and higher education sectors.

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