



**Pathways
in Place**
Co-Creating Community Capabilities

Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

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A partnership between



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Executive Summary

This submission makes the following recommendations:

- That governments collect data around which student groups are streamed into ATAR and non-ATAR streams, and their relative outcomes over time.
- That school level metrics be developed on the education and employment outcomes of Year 12 graduates, beyond Year 12 completion rates.
- That higher education institutions be supported to develop further curriculum and meaningful pathways for non-ATAR cohorts to engage in higher education.
- That more transparent ethnicity data be collected to create a better understanding of how ethnic minority groups are faring in the Australian education system, highlighting areas of need and strength.
- That specific reporting on the education success and outcomes of children in out-of-home care be developed within both the schools and the higher education sector.
- That specific funding be allocated to support children in OOHC within schools, including through trauma-informed approaches that recognise their broad and unique support needs.
- That children in out-of-home care be considered a priority equity group within both schools and higher education sectors, and that policies be aligned across sectors.

Introduction

The Pathways in Place: Co-Creating Community Capabilities (PiP) program at Griffith University welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the public consultation process for the Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

PiP is an innovative program of research and action that supports the flourishing of children and young people. This program is jointly delivered by Victoria University and Griffith University with funding generously provided by the Paul Ramsay Foundation through a five-year funding partnership.

The Griffith University program works with communities in Logan, Queensland and focuses on early learning and development pathways, children and youth 0-15 years in the Logan, Queensland area. The program uses a place-based approach designed to strengthen community capacity and agency in Logan.

This submission will focus on the following items from the Review's Terms of Reference:

- What targets and reforms should be included in the next NSRA to drive real improvements in student outcomes, with a particular focus on students who are most at risk of falling behind and in need of more assistance - for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional,

rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English.

- How the next agreement can contribute to improving student mental health and wellbeing, by addressing in-school factors while acknowledging the impact of non-school factors on wellbeing.
- How data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes.

Streaming in Schools: Equity Implications

The underrepresentation of Indigenous people, people with a disability, people from regional and remote areas, and people from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australian higher education is well documented and has proven to be largely unmovable despite numerous reviews, inquiries, and targets. The reasons for the intractable nature of equity targets are multifaceted. However, the prevalence of student streaming, or tracking, and the equity implications of this practice, are an important factor. Australian schools have a long history of streaming students into perceived ability-based classes. The OECD report on equity states that 98% of secondary schools in Australia utilise some form of streaming (OECD, 2012). The weight of evidence is critical of streaming generally, and demonstrates that streaming does not improve overall academic outcomes for students and tends to curtail post-secondary options (Hattie 2009; Johnston & Wildly, 2018; Macqueen 2011). Australian research on streaming has typically focused on the benefits for high achieving students rather than the often negative implications for equity groups, particularly Indigenous students, students from other ethnic minorities and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Johnston & Wildly, 2016).

ATAR and non-ATAR Pathways

Our primary focus here is on the streaming of secondary school students into ATAR and non-ATAR streams. There are numerous explicit and implicit objectives behind the streaming of students into these pathways. In seeking to meet ambitious Year 12 completion targets, states, territories, and the schools within these jurisdictions have expanded the practice of streaming to improve student choice, meet workforce needs, and engage students who might otherwise have withdrawn in earlier years. In particular, schools and systems have developed vocationally oriented pathways, typically in contrast to an ATAR track. Less explicitly, streaming supports the desire of some schools to preserve high average ATARs, rests on assumptions that some students are more suited to vocational education or employment rather than higher education, and reflects a largely unquestioned belief that streaming students into different pathways will not limit their post-secondary options.

Whilst the number of students who complete a senior secondary certificate of education across Australia is relatively uniform, there is significant variability across Australia as to ATAR attainment. The proportion of completing Year 12 students who achieve an ATAR ranges from around 30% in Western Australia and Tasmania to around 60% in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria

(HESP Submission, 2023). Overall, across Australia in 2022, just over half of the potential year 12 population received an ATAR (HESP submission, 2023).

Importantly, ATAR completion is highly correlated with race, ethnicity, and class.

Set out in Table 1 is the New South Wales ATAR data which demonstrates that almost 90% of non-Indigenous students who complete the HSC receive an ATAR, but half of the Indigenous students who complete the HSC receive an ATAR.

Table 1: New South Wales ATAR data from 2020, 2021 and 2022

New South Wales	2020		2021		2022	
% of HSC Students who achieved an ATAR	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
	42.8%	74.2%	42%	73.8%	40.3%	74%
% of Students who achieved a HSC	85.4%	88.9%	83.2%	88.8%	80.2%	88%

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, non-ATAR tracks rarely lead directly to higher education. The Queensland Next Steps data clarifies this correlation. Next Steps is an annual, voluntary survey completed 6 months after finishing year 12. Table 2 breaks down the destination of Qld year 12 completers by ATAR status for the year 2022. As the table demonstrates, just 5.2% of non-ATAR track students go on to study a Bachelor Degree. Importantly, these students are also four times more likely to be Not in Labor Force, Employment or Training (NILFET) than ATAR track students.

Table 2: Next Steps responses for 2022

Next Steps QLD survey	2022	
Post-school destinations	ATAR	Non -ATAR
In education and training	75.5	39.9
Bachelor degree	65.1	5.2
Certificates/Diplomas		
Certificate IV or above	3.9	6.5
Certificate I-III	2.3	6.4
Apprentice/Trainee		
Apprentice	2.4	17.4
Trainee	1.7	4.3
Not in education and training		
Employed	20.8	42.9
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
Total respondents	23,006	16,510

Victoria presents a similar picture. In 2022, over 15,000 students completed the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), and of that cohort less than 1% continued to higher education. In addition, the VCAL cohort is largely made up of Indigenous students (42%) and low SES and other marginalised students. The equity implications of this streaming practice for higher education are clear (Harvey 2016; Firth Report, 2020). The Victorian Government has recognised some of the limitations of VCAL and is disbanding the pathway, but ATAR streaming will continue for Victorian students through the VCAL replacement pathway (the VCE Vocational Major).

Steaming also impacts on higher education rates generally. As we outline below in Figure 1, there is a correlation between state and territory higher education participation rates and the proportion of senior secondary students in those states and territories who are enrolled in ATAR-track pathways. As demonstrated in the table below, Queensland and Western Australia, states that heavily stream students into non-ATAR pathways, have lower higher education participation rates overall.

Figure 1: Proportion of young people aged 20 who were currently enrolled in a ‘University or other tertiary institution’ by state and year



Data source: (ABS Census - 2006, 2011, 2016 & 2021)

Raising overall higher education growth and meeting equity targets both rely on reform of the secondary school sector. While much focus has been on school funding, particularly the Gonski review in 2010, and the private/public school divide, too little attention has been paid to the non-ATAR streams and their effects on post-secondary pathways. Indeed, the focus on measuring Year 12 completion rates, both nationally and specifically within Indigenous education, has not been accompanied by an equivalent focus on postsecondary outcomes. Collecting and analysing school level data on the outcomes of graduating students would help to focus schools and systems on the development of pathways that lead to positive education and employment outcomes for all students. Equally, higher education institutions could be funded and encouraged to develop more meaningful pathways for non-ATAR cohorts to engage in higher education. Higher education is not a desirable pathway for every student, but currently too many non-ATAR pathways lead to closed doors rather than choices, and to a reification rather than moderation of inequities.

Disguising the Gaps: Indigenous Year 12 Completion and ATAR Attainment

The proportion of students across Australia finishing Year 12 has risen dramatically since the 1980s, underpinned by research demonstrating the poor employment outcomes and social exclusion faced by early school leavers (Keating et al., 2013). However, as the Consultation Paper makes clear, gaps

remain, particularly for low SES and Indigenous students. The attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has narrowed as Indigenous attainment has risen from 51.8 percentage points in 2011 to 68.1 percentage points in 2021. Despite these gains, attainment falls short of the 74.1% required to meet the 2030 Closing the Gap targets (Australian Government, 2023).

The largely exclusive policy focus on year 12 attainment can conceal other important education and equity issues, in particular the ATAR gap. As highlighted above, in NSW almost 90% of non-Indigenous students who complete the HSC receive an ATAR but only half of the Indigenous students who complete the HSC receive an ATAR. In Victoria, the Firth Review found that more than 42% of Indigenous senior secondary enrolments were within VCAL compared to 14% of non-Indigenous students, and less than 1% of VCAL students transition to higher education (Firth, 2020).

In Queensland, the Next Steps survey data can be disaggregated into the destinations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous year 12 completers, set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Next Steps survey data for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

	2020		2021		2022	
Post-school destinations	Indigenous	All students	Indigenous	All students	Indigenous	All students
In education and training						
Bachelor degree	13.3	40.4	17.1	41.2	15.6	40.1
Certificates/Diplomas						
Certificate IV or above	4.0	4.7	4.8	5.5	4.1	5.0
Certificate I-III	8.9	5.0	8.2	5.3	5.9	4.0
Apprentice/Trainee						
Apprentice	4.9	6.1	6.7	8.0	9.4	8.6
Trainee	3.6	1.9	5.2	3.1	5.3	2.7
Not in education and training						
Employed full-time	7.2	5.8	10.9	9.2	14.6	11.6
Employed part-time	19.6	16.7	22.5	17.7	21.8	18.4
Looking for work	27.3	13.9	19.4	7.4	17.4	6.5
NILFET	11.1	5.6	5.2	2.6	5.9	2.9
Total respondents	1,260	28,451	1,704	36,741	1,799	39,516

Source: (Qld Government, custom request, 2023)

The data shows that 17.4% of Indigenous Year 12 completers are recorded as looking for work compared to 6.5% of other students in 2022 (Qld Government, 2023). Overall, the survey reveals that 76.7% of Indigenous Year 12 completers were engaged in further education, training or paid employment in 2022 (Qld Government, 2023). However, it is important to note that the number of

Indigenous students engaged in a Bachelor's degree was 15.6% compared to 40.1% of non-Indigenous students in 2022 and that part time employment was the most common destination for Indigenous Year 12 completers (21.8%). No data is collected on the ATAR attainment of other ethnicities, but the outcomes are likely to be similar for Māori and Pasifika students, whose higher education attainment rates are similar to Indigenous Australians but for whom data is not systematically collected.

As the Consultation Paper states, the collection and publication of data is a key cornerstone of holding governments to account and for improving educational outcomes (Australian Government, 2023). The lack of transparency of Indigenous ATAR data is worthy of discussion. Each state included in our discussion in this paper had a different system for the release of ATAR data. Western Australia is the only state that releases Indigenous and non-Indigenous ATAR and education certificate data publicly. There is a pressing need for a more centralised process for the collection, dissemination and analysis of educational data. In addition, there is also a requirement for a national year 12 completer survey to understand, at a national level, the destinations of ATAR and non-ATAR students and the composition of students within the non-ATAR pathways and their post-school outcomes. The dominant focus on year 12 attainment as an end in itself could also be revised, with greater focus on the post-school outcomes of students.

Understanding the pathways of students from secondary school to further education and into employment is particularly crucial for the students who are missing out. It is only through understanding the data on these pathways that the education system can be re-designed (Mitchell Report, 2016). The restriction of access to Indigenous data is particularly concerning and would appear to be at odds with the priority areas identified by the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to improve data collection and enable the sharing of data to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make informed decisions (Australian Government, 2020).

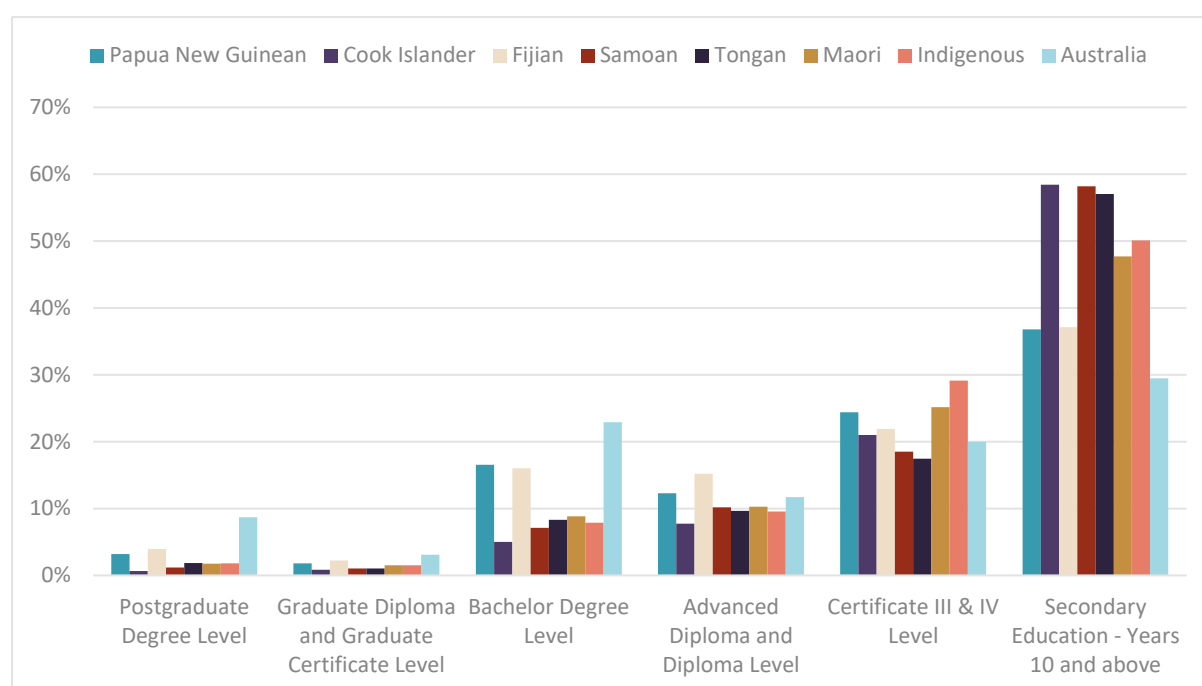
Statistical Invisibility: Māori and Pasifika Student Outcomes

Academic Outcomes

There are just under 500,000 Māori and Pasifika people living in Australia according to the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census (ABS, 2021). Although they are heterogeneous groups, they have similarities with family, spiritual and cultural connection being central to their way of life (Shepherd & Ilalio, 2016). Apart from available census data, little is known about their pathways through education as the Departments of Education across the country do not collect ethnicity data. This data would provide much needed information about the academic success and challenges of these students. ABS data reporting on higher education attainment indicates that Māori and Pasifika students complete university at similar rates to Indigenous Australians, as shown in Figure 2. The reasons for this underrepresentation are varied, including the fact that these students are Indigenous

peoples, impacted by colonisation, now living in a land not of their own which carries complexity around identity and sense of place. Other factors include the immigration status of many Māori and Pasifika people. The Special Category Visa (Subclass 444) is most used by Māori and Pasifika people, and it precludes students from obtaining HECS-HELP loans while studying at university, amongst other restrictions. Knowing that children will not be able to access university presumably impacts decision making around career pathways of students while at school, limiting students' higher education goals. Similarly, it can be presumed that, as with Indigenous students, Māori and Pasifika students are being streamed towards non-ATAR pathways which data, outlined above, indicates do not lead to higher education.

Figure 2: Higher education attainment for 20 – 69-year-old people living in Australia by ancestry



The State Parent: Children in Out-of-Home Care

As of June 2021, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that approximately 46,200 children nationally were in out-of-home care (OOHC) (2022). This is a rate of eight children per 1,000. Approximately 19,500 of these children were Indigenous, a rate of 58 children per 1,000, seven times the rate of the rest of the population (AIHW, 2022).

Although the number of children in OOHC is relatively small, these children are a significantly disadvantaged group, often experiencing trauma and instability with multiple foster care placements

and schools. They face many barriers to accessing basic services of housing, education, health and employment in early adulthood (Berger et al., 2022). Children in OOHC often struggle within the education system, experiencing poorer academic outcomes, lower rates of engagement and higher rates of dropout, school suspensions and expulsions (Berger et al., 2022).

Despite being a small group there is a need for specific reporting on the education success and outcomes of children in OOHC, particularly as they are parented by the state. The state acting “in loco parentis” has a statutory obligation to keep these vulnerable children safe and needs to be transparent in relation to the academic outcomes of children in OOHC. We have previously written extensively on the culture of low expectations, low education priority in transition planning, lack of data, and low postsecondary participation of care experienced students (Harvey et al., 2015 & 2016). Within school systems, aggregated data could be transparently published on Year 12 completions, ATAR completions, and postsecondary outcomes of children in care.

Trauma informed schools

In a study by Berger et al. (2022), children in OOHC provided feedback regarding schools’ lack of understanding about their concerns and needs. The study suggested that teachers would benefit from trauma-informed training and increased understanding of the difficulties these children face (Berger et al. 2022). While some states have developed specific school initiatives to oversee children in care, e.g. Lookout schools in Victoria, holistic policies are needed nationally that consider the unique needs of these children, which include experiences of abuse, grief and loss and unstable environments which impact on their emotional, social and physical wellbeing, often resulting in poor academic outcomes. Ensuring that schools are equipped with the skills, knowledge and support for children in care would go some way towards providing safe and nurturing educational environments, thus reducing some of the disadvantage for these children.

Pathways

Over the last few years, states and territories have developed policies to support care leavers through to the age of 21, largely in response to the Home Stretch campaign (<https://thehomestretch.org.au/>), in order to attempt to address the relatively poor educational and social outcomes for care leavers. However, there remains no consistent or national approach to tracking the academic performance of children in OOHC whilst at school and no publication of relevant outcome data. In addition, there is a need for data to be collected on the postsecondary choices of children in OOHC. This would include data on university applications, offers, participation and retention (Harvey et al., 2015) and would complement initiatives such as the Raising Expectations program, supported by the Victorian Government (<https://www.raisingexpectations.com.au>).

Pathways and support for children in OOHC need to be strengthened to ensure these children have both a clear understanding of their educational and occupational opportunities, and the necessary support to access them. Barriers facing children in care are often extremely challenging, resulting in relatively low academic achievement, and a high percentage transition from care to the youth justice

system (Lund & Stokes, 2020; Mendes et al., 2014). Despite these outcomes, our research has highlighted the specific strengths of many care leavers, including independence, resilience, and emotional intelligence (Harvey et al. 2017). Addressing the culture of low expectations requires a renewed focus on education as a protective factor in its own right, specific funding to support children in out-of-home care within schools, data collection on academic outcomes, and higher education reform to include care leavers within a revised student equity framework.

Conclusion

We thank the Panel for the opportunity to contribute to the Review and we look forward to future opportunities to participate. If you wish to discuss the issues raised in more detail, please contact the Pathways in Place team at pathwaysinplace@griffith.edu.au or andrew.harvey@griffith.edu.au.

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