Mug punters and the bad news of education

It has been unkindly suggested that I begin this speech by noting that it is the first time that a Vice-Chancellor has addressed a room in Canberra without asking for money. However, this would not be accurate. As Vice-Chancellor of a Catholic University, there will be a collection after questions. As this is a journalistic occasion, proceeds will comprise a record low.

Speaking of journalists, normally, they can be relied upon to pick serious issues to report: chainsaw massacres; the state of undress of Kate Middleton; and the adolescent psychology of Tony Abbott. Lately, however, there has been a troubling shift in standards of relevance.

Improbably, education has become news, and better still, bad news. One cannot open a paper without trawling up some educational controversy. Whether it is the ramifications of Gonski; enraged cardinals thrashing State education ministers over school-funding cuts; or allegations the average teacher has literacy levels that would shame a Neanderthal, education is out there.

Astonishingly, this national testiness defies compelling evidence to the contrary. Australia’s schools are not collapsing, despite minute shifts in NAPLAN scores that no-one understands anyway. Most parents seem to think their children’s teachers work reasonably effectively, and at least are more competent pedagogues than they are disciplinarians. We have a world class university system, with the statistical sprinkling of top one-hundred institutions, and graduates highly sought in employment. Satisfyingly, the expansion of universities over the
past two years has brought Australia to the verge of reaching OEDC standards for the proportion of citizens holding a university degree. The Prime Minister even seems to have won some sort of UN Gong in world education from Ban Ki-moon which would have left her predecessors H V Evatt and K M Rudd green with envy.

Compared to worries around the resources boom, the rise of China, climate change and the inexplicable failure of Carlton to make the finals, this all seems fairly propitious.

But for some reason, education is in the proverbial gun. Instead of basking in the reality that we finally send students to university in numbers comparable to our competitors, we agonise about whether they are up to it. Rather than being pleased we have enough teachers to reduce class sizes once rivalling football match attendances, we sneer at the supposed Year 12 scores of student teachers. We wonder aloud how these people get into universities, while hoping the only copy of our own year 12 results was cremated with Mum.

Most strikingly, these attacks on university education and teacher quality are led by the very State governments responsible for the teaching profession. In New South Wales, education minister Adrian Piccoli is the Savonarola of new teachers, castigating them for everything from weak Year 12 results to an inability to spell, and probably bad haircuts. He and like-minded colleagues thunder at universities for admitting these troglodytes and demand “higher standards”.1 Education Quality now rivals Law ‘n Order as the most intellectually bankrupt policy debate in Australia: if every problem of crime can be solved by massive prison sentences, so schools will be perfect if only we raise the ATARs of entrant teachers.

The obvious difficulty with this is that it is the States themselves who run the schools; set the standards for teachers; employ them, determine their pay rates, approve work practices and arrange promotions. Laying sole blame upon universities for the quality of teaching involves a sidestep that would do credit to an All Blacks half-back or a used car salesman faced with an uncongenial warranty.

So what is going on? Can it really be the case that our teacher workforce is so bad, and responsibility rests not on those who run the system but those who merely supply it?

**Picking winners – selection into universities**

Apart from money, four things matter to universities: research; teaching; staff and students. When it comes to students, what matters is having enough and keeping them. Good teaching, beer and sleazy social life help.

You would think that selecting students would be a prime focus for universities. After all, they spend millions on picking the right staff, doing the right research and improving their teaching. Students define the character of a university, and selection defines the character of the student body. Surely, universities must have invested a lot in methods to select their students.

Moreover, student selection into universities ultimately determines the life course of millions of the most talented Australians, ensuring along the way that Howard’s Battlers and Gillard’s Working Families get a fair crack at advancement. Beyond this, it strongly influences national productivity by setting the operational composition of vital professional groups, ensuring that engineers are raucous, doctors insensitive, lawyers unethical, and so forth.

But selection always has been the shabby back porch of Australian universities in terms of investment and focus, and it is not hard to see why. In the Year 12 school rankings – whether termed ATARs or whatever - both universities and governments have the perfect excuse not to worry. Just read the numbers, and problem solved; an objective, authoritative, numerical solution, and best of all, one for which universities have neither to pay nor take responsibility. In the immortal words of the Emperor Napoleon, nice work if you can get it.

This was reasonable in the 1920s, when the year twelve exams actually were specifically designed for university selection of a tiny minority of people. But today, when they have
become a general purpose certification of education, they have the fitness for purpose, as sole determiner of university entry, of an egg beater in a bush fire.

The ATAR itself is a term more used than understood. It sounds like some improbable life form out of science fiction, like an AVATAR, or an intelligent Collingwood supporter. In fact, it not even a school “mark” as aging parents would understand it, let alone a direct reflection of intelligence, like being born Victorian. Rather, the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank is just that: your percentile rank achieved at the end of Year 12, actually calculated on the number of students who entered Year 7.

The problems of the ATAR as an omni-competent tool for university selection are so legion that no-one but a politician – and certainly no Vice-Chancellor - could fail to know them. No-one denies a Year 12 score is a useful guide to intelligence and aptitude. But to treat it as the final intellectual judgement of God defies reality.

For a start, the thing that correlates most strongly with an ATAR is not subsequent success at university but socio-economic status. Study after study suggests that if your parents are jobless and you live in Campbelltown, your ATAR statistically declines accordingly. Studies are yet to link low socio-economic status with stupidity.

Similar studies show that while ATARS are reasonably good predictors of success at high levels above eighty, as soon as you move below this into the middle tiers of achievement - from about fifty-five on, where most of the action is in terms of expanding university participation - their reliability declines dramatically. So trying to impose life choices on the difference between sixty-five and seventy-three is a little like selecting students on hair colour or football team allegiance, but less fun.

---

Worse, the usefulness of the ATAR declines still further once students have been at university for a year. Predictably, a year’s equal access to good university teaching is calculated to iron out quite a lot of ATAR difference, together with the disparities in opportunity or maturity that produced it. This hardly is surprising, but it does point to a fundamental truth: what really matters is the quality of a student once they have completed their university degree, not when they enter it.

All this is quite apart from the realities that an ATAR cannot adequately reflect negative influences like disadvantage, disruption or remoteness; nor can it measure (except accidentally) positive qualities like ethics, vocation or dedication. In terms both of self-actualisation and national contribution, the ATAR can harness neither the abilities of a deserving object of disadvantage, nor those of the less appealing, under-achieving seventeen-year-old football menace who nevertheless will be a public asset at twenty-two, given nurture and attention.

These inherent limitations of the ATAR are profoundly reinforced by the utter lack of transparency of published course cut-offs purportedly based on them. Put simply, university cut-offs are as easy to rig as a bush picnic race meeting.

Students and parents, who see cut-offs as a proxy for course quality, would be astonished by this claim. After all, does not a cut-off at an ATAR of 70 guarantee that at least the vast majority of entrants achieved that rank? It does not. While many universities genuinely set cut-offs reflecting the lowest score normally required for entry, others apply wall-paper mathematics that would have impressed Bernie Madoff to give that impression, while employing a variety of stratagems – going well beyond valid bonuses for disadvantage or special characteristics - to ensure that a large majority of students in a course never approach its cut-off. Gullible ministers nod at such courses, while frowning on those with “lower” genuine entry scores. The issue is not whether the students in question are acceptable, but whether their selection was open and transparent.
So welcome to the ATAR as it really is, the alleged decline of which is the source of so much angst in the education “quality” debate. Undoubtedly, it is a seriously useful set of numbers guiding university selection. It also is partial, socially insensitive, inherently weak in the middle and lower ranges, blunt, incapable of assimilating relevant factors that are not purely educational, limited as a means of promoting equity and productivity, a classic input rather than an output measure, a waning asset over a student career and almost infinitely manipulable. Other than that, it is perfect.

So the real issue with the ATAR is the same as that with Elle Macpherson: not its “decline”, but its limitations. It is hard to imagine an overall selection system that did not have something like the ATAR as a vital working part, but the challenge is to devise other elements compensating for its entrenched weaknesses. This is why a majority of entrants to Australian university courses already come in on something more than an ATAR. From the University of Melbourne’s bold postgraduate entry model to the equity schemes of the regional universities through the portfolios required of students at other institutions, universities have had to think innovatively about selection and around the ATAR. This is a good, not a bad thing.

Selecting teachers – backing a loser

Anxiety over the quality of students selected into university, particularly aspiring teachers, is nothing new. Over the past decade, various qangos and ministers have vied to rescue the teaching profession from itself.

Recently federal politicians of all stripes have been calling for teachers to be allowed into their degrees only if they come in the top thirty per cent of students for literacy or numeracy. That might be a plausible goal except for the fact that students take their last literacy and numeracy tests in year nine, some three years before they would be undertaking a university degree. Perhaps this could be combined with toddler aptitude assessments.
But for once the uber-regulators are not to be found here in Canberra: rather they dwell in the States. Outbreaks have been sporadically strong in Queensland and Victoria, but the undisputed leader is now New South Wales, with the release of its discussion paper *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning*. Indeed, concern over entrant teacher quality is so prevalent it now is being examined by the multi-ministerial Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC).

The NSW paper, with its neo-Maoist slogan title, is the classic of its genre. It canvasses every conceivable barrier to entering teaching, from stipulating secondary school programmes, to narrowly prescribed university curricula, required skill sets, and separate entry and exit tests for university education degrees. Remarkably, given the challenges discussed here, the paper evinces a touching faith in higher ATAR scores as a panacea for new teacher quality. It gives no specific figure, but the magic number around the traps seems to be seventy.

The paper’s argument around a minimum teaching ATAR is made in a very particular context. It maintains the uncapping of university places has produced exploding student numbers, with many entrants going into teaching, with inadequate ATARs. Moreover, the paper asserts that as there already is a gross over-supply of teachers in New South Wales rivalling only the number of politicians in Australia as a whole, ATARs (and other requirements) logically could be increased without any shortfall in supply.

There are more troubling questions here than presented by Tony Abbott appearing publicly in lacy lingerie. Starting with the attraction of high-ATAR students as teachers, the most basic understanding of employment markets includes knowing that the higher the ATAR, the wider the career choice. Inexplicably, many students choose highly paid over low salary jobs. State governments have themselves ensured teaching is poorly paid compared to jobs typically pulling astral ATARs, such as law and medicine. Without better salaries, teacher
entrants in the nineties are an endangered species, and governments whose financial policies ensure this should blush before complaining.

Worse, the focus on entry ranks ignores the single most important quality in any teacher. This is not genius, which is nice, but unnecessary. It is not subject mastery, which is what you get at university. It is the personality type that cares about people, likes them, wants to teach them and wants them to learn. The cleverest person with the best ATAR and the deepest subject knowledge will be a rotten teacher without this. The inspiring teachers the State education ministers want us to remember were precisely these “teachers by vocation”, and we treasure their character, not their Year 12 results. This is the quality we should try to test, rather than trawling simplistically for higher ATARs. We want Mr. Chipps, not the nerds from The Big Bang Theory.

This is why so many universities are experimenting with alternative entry schemes for teaching students. From the “Teach for Australia” programme, where recent graduates in other disciplines commence new careers as teachers, to schemes which value prior life experience, to my own university’s “Early Achievers’ Program” which promotes students with a demonstrable record of community engagement, all focus on bringing dedicated teachers into Australian classrooms, rather than teenagers with a number. Where do these schemes fit in a minimum ATAR regime?

The real question of teacher quality is not how people enter education courses, but how they leave them. The whole point of an education degree is not to take but to make a teacher. Trying to determine who should be a teacher on the basis of adolescent school marks rather than practical and theoretical training received during their course is like selecting the Australian cricket team on school batting averages while ignoring Sheffield Shield innings.

The flat reality is that a minimum ATAR of around seventy would disproportionately exclude students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who we in turn rely upon to teach back into their own communities. It would decimate the cadre of Indigenous teachers. It would
render virtually every education faculty within regional universities economically unviable, critically undermining the supply of teachers into those regions. It would stall education as a traditional entry point for first-in family students.

Of course, if you believe in a glut of teachers, perhaps none of this matters. But taking the New South Wales Discussion Paper as the paradigm, it is - ironically - weak on maths. The only real figure is that around 5,500 aspiring teachers are produced annually, while only 500 are “permanently” employed in the public system.4

Inexplicably, the paper omits some crucial further facts: that its calculations do not include teachers employed in the Catholic and Independent schools systems; that behind the word “permanent” lurks the reality the New South Wales Department itself deliberately has casualised its workforce, so new teachers overwhelmingly go into “casual positions” that actually may be full-time; that the Department consequently has no less than the equivalent of 10,000 full-time teachers employed as casuals, who annually deliver around 2,000,000 days of teaching; that around fifty per cent of the Department’s teachers have been employed in the last five years, odd if no-one is being hired; that there are three major systemic leakages of teachers (shortly after entry, when raising a family and to access superannuation); and that real full-time employment rates as teachers among my own graduates – the largest education faculty in the State – is eighty per cent, with ninety-five per cent of the remainder in other full or part time employment or study. Journalists feel free to weep. In fact, nothing in the paper indicates it is informed by real workforce planning, or even serious astrological insight.

So what is the politics behind this paper-thin façade? It seems to go like this. To genuinely improve the quality of teachers, salaries would need to be increased. But the States generally are cutting education budgets, and have no intention of spending any more of their own money on teachers. Indeed, one obsession in New South Wales seems to be actually

---

reducing investment in teacher training by limiting the availability of practicum places. So the increased investment option is out.

An alternative would be to confront industrial and work practices in schools that do not reward high achievement and protect low performance by teachers. This is the approach that might be expected of a Liberal Government, and is followed in Victoria. There are cautious hints along these lines elsewhere, but not many. School reform would involve confronting the unions and expending political capital. So the reform option is out.

Instead, some States have hit upon an approach that minimises all three of investment, political courage, and outcomes. If the state of the teaching profession can be blamed on universities, problem solved. The States do not fund universities: they are the Commonwealth’s problem. In fact, the States typically take more out in payroll tax than they put into the entire system. By pointing the finger at universities, they transfer political and fiscal responsibility to Commonwealth Education Minister, Chris Evans, while avoiding any nasty fights with the unions. In fact, the States stand to make money if they stall teacher production, both because it will pay for fewer training practicums, and ultimately there will be fewer teachers in the classroom. The fact that class sizes inevitably will rise rapidly seems not to bother anyone.

This is an approach that incidentally buys into a whole range of extraneous problems. Taking the most obvious, the central components of being an independent, self-accrediting university – a status bitterly fought for in the recent debate over the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) – is the right of to choose what is taught and researched, and who is hired and enrolled. No self-respecting institution will accept dictation over who it accepts into one of its courses, particularly on the basis of an obviously flawed policy, which in principle could be extended to any one or all of a university’s programmes.

At the same time, the regulatory coherence offered by the TEQSA regime will be fatally undermined if States like New South Wales – self-excluded from a role in tertiary regulation
by chronic lack of commitment and funding over decades – now seek to duplicate regulatory regimes in every area of particular interest. This not only would create a degree of administrative chaos unrivalled since John Hewson tried to explain the application of the GST to an iced cake, but involve the Commonwealth paying and accepting political responsibility for higher education, while States mandated course content and workforce development. There incidentally must be grave constitutional doubt over the capacity of the States to do any such thing, given a raft of Commonwealth higher education legislation (including the TEQSA legislation) covers the field of university quality.

What the notably successful Catholic and independent sectors must think of being dictated to by a struggling State education apparatus, while it cheerfully cuts their funding, may only be imagined.

Mind you, every cloud has a silver lining. What other professions are so nationally vital that they should require a minimum ATAR? Surely not Vice Chancellors, but journalists are vital to democracy, and what about politicians who actually run the country? Perhaps pre-selection should be reserved for those with ATARs over ninety? Or possibly candidates should merely be required by law to declare their school results to an appalled public? Or maybe journalists could escape scrutiny themselves merely by a little investigation of the background educational performance of our politicians, especially those keen on minimum ATARs for others.

**Selecting for quality**

Neither universities nor governments ever have faced the true complexities of selection, not only for teachers, but generally. On the one hand, the ATAR and its equivalents have provided a convenient bolt hole. On the other, any university adopting more complex criteria would face loss of market share through students preferring a simple ATAR-based application to State admission authorities. Institutionally, more sophisticated processes would be challenging and expensive, rather like marrying Kim Kardashian.
If the current impoverished debate shows anything, it is that the time has come to address the real complexities of selection.

At the macro policy level, we should begin by embracing the complexities involved. Selection ideally should be “trigonometric”, assessing quality from converging but different perspectives. It should be diverse: different courses may require different approaches. On overall quality, it is capacity at graduation, not entry, which matters most and there is no reason Australia should have fewer university graduates than comparable countries. Finally, good selection is vital to both personal achievement and national productivity.\(^5\)

Instrumentally, former Macquarie University Vice-Chancellor, Steven Schwartz has set out operating criteria for an effective selection regime. It should be transparent; select students best able to complete their course; based on reliable and valid instruments; minimise barriers to entry; and be supported by professional structures and practices.\(^6\) At present, we have a system answering these criteria at best variably. This is not the fault of the ATAR as such. It is our fault for having placed disproportionate weight upon a single, specialised measure of selection. The question is, what is the practical alternative?

The start, as stated, is to accept the issue is serious and complex, and design accordingly, eschewing simplistic, populist “solutions”. A good beginning would be a nationally coordinated system for University application, allowing students to apply through a single portal, rather than diverse State admission centres. This would encourage consistency, transparency and best practice.

The central challenge, though, is encouraging universities to adopt increasingly sophisticated measures of selection, adapted to the needs of students, courses and – ultimately – the nation. This is difficult, so long as a raw ATAR remains the simple default

---

\(^5\) See Craven, G., ‘When Elitism Rules the Real Elite is Lost in the Shuffle,’ Australian, 8 August 2012.

option for students to obtain university entry. Nor is there the option of imposing some new, universal norm of selection, given the self-accrediting, independent status of universities.

The answer seems to lie in our increasing understanding of higher education standards. As indicated, it is not an impossible task to formulate a broad matrix against which selection processes can be tested. Synthesizing qualities already mentioned, selection processes should, so far as practicable, be multi-stranded; adapted to courses and students; maximise opportunity; be transparent; assess ability to complete; be based on reliable instruments; professionally applied; and operate in the national interest. Were Australia to possess an adequately autonomous statutory body in the nature of a Universities Commission, it would be a manageable task for such a body to assess bands of University course selection processes against such criteria.

The practical effect almost certainly would be the development of diverse selection systems for different courses, with innovation and competition between institutions to devise their own best mechanisms. These might include use of the ATAR, internal school results, weighting of results in particular subject areas, aptitude tests, application of bonuses reflecting disadvantage or other relevant circumstances, past study, interviews, portfolios, personal statements of achievement, special entry tests and a ban on baseball caps worn backwards. Universities would make these arrangements publicly available in a selection policy statement, which incidentally would shine useful light into such sludgy barrels as real ATAR cut-offs, median course ATAR scores, bonuses and so forth. The otherwise inevitable “rush to the bottom” towards a minimalist selection system would be precluded by the process of external assessment against standards, while university independence would be assured by their latitude of those standards.

Realistically, course selection probably would resolve into three broad categories. Areas of purer academic study, such as arts and science, might be adequately assessed by ATAR alone, though subject weighting and bonuses could be applied. Other areas, which involve
the development of professional as well as academic capacities inevitably would become “ATAR plus”, employing ATARs together with measures like portfolios and possibly interviews. Many professions would fall into this category, including teaching and – as at present – medicine. Finally, there would be genuine “alternative entry” courses, in which an ATAR score might or might not figure prominently, with such courses as performing and visual arts being possibilities.

There would be challenges in implementing such a scheme. Critically, comprehensiveness would need to be modified by capacity: personally interviewing 8,000 applicants for a course would defeat most universities, and imaginative proxies would need to be developed. Similarly, the current legislative evolution of TEQSA has not yet arrived at quite the level of autonomy and institutional alignment that would guarantee independence of selection by universities within a broad standards matrix: somewhat different institutional arrangements would be required.

But these difficulties are not insuperable. Moreover, it is imperative that they be resolved if we are to maximise the opportunities of Australians, and avoid the type of sterile debate currently developing around “quality”. After all, it is not as if we presently enjoy a selection system that is the result of careful design for purpose. In the words of Ireland’s greatest philosopher “If I were going to Dublin, I wouldn’t be starting from here”.