

The Hidden Barrier: How School Streaming Shapes University Participation in Australia

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Abstract

In 2023, a major review of Australian higher education (Australian Universities Accord) advocated sectoral equity and growth, including the expanded participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other underserved students. Central to increasing growth through equity is the secondary school pipeline, given the high proportion of commencing university students who transition directly from secondary schools. Within the school sector, an under-researched area is the practice of streaming, or tracking, whereby senior secondary students are typically divided into either vocational or higher education pathways. There are other more visible forms of streaming such as school type (e.g., public, Catholic, independent) but the division between vocational and higher education pathways is less formal and not captured well in systems data. This paper aims to examine the scale and equity implications of senior secondary streaming across multiple Australian jurisdictions, with particular attention to its relationship to higher education access. Drawing on available school and postsecondary data across multiple states and territories, we find that the practice of streaming is extensive, that groups such as Indigenous students are highly over-represented in vocational streams, and that very few students in vocational streams transition directly to higher education. The findings have implications for higher education but also for the school and vocational sectors and the future of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

Keywords

Higher education; Student equity; Indigenous education; School streaming.

Introduction

The under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, respectfully referred to hereafter as Indigenous, and other underserved groups in Australian higher education is well documented and has changed little since the introduction of the 1990 national higher education student equity framework (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024; Harvey et al., 2016; Koshy, 2020). Following the 2023 national review of higher education, the Australian Universities Accord, the Australian Government set ambitious targets to increase student equity (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Parity of participation was sought for groups such as Indigenous people and people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds by 2050. There has been some growth in participation of Indigenous students in higher education, but this growth has largely mirrored community population growth. In 2023, Indigenous people still comprised only 2.2 per cent of the domestic higher education population despite representing 3.8 per cent of the Australian population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). The proportion of enrolled domestic onshore students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile has remained below 20 per cent since records began in the late 1980s and fell to 16 per cent in 2024 from 17.1 per cent in 2016 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2026).

The Australian Universities Accord report acknowledges the importance of secondary schools but provides only brief reference to the challenge of streaming, whereby students are divided into primarily vocational or higher education pathways (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024, p. 95; Harvey et al., 2025). The 2023 review of Australian schooling (referred to

as the Schooling Review) includes only two brief references to the practice of streaming or tracking (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023, pp. 91, 93), drawing only on a commissioned piece of research by consultants. Based on the consultants' comparative international research, the Schooling Review argues that reducing the extent of streaming within schools would have only a "mixed" impact on SES diversity, "unclear" impact on educational outcomes, and "low" transferability to Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023, p. 83). More broadly, the consultants' report claims that streaming is "falling out of favour" in Australia and that Australia's current policy focus on "stronger parity between vocational and academic 'leanings' is driving systems away from anything that looks like a 'two-tier' system" (Nous Group, 2023, p. 24).

Confusion sometimes arises because the practice of streaming in Australian secondary schools takes several forms, including through enrolments into the academically selective schools that exist in some states, the International Baccalaureate, and the broader division between private and public schools. Streaming also occurs over time through 'ability grouping', where students are streamed into different classes and subjects based on their current achievement or performance. Research suggests substantial streaming practices operate in lower secondary school levels and some form of streaming is practised in approximately 86 per cent of Grade 10 (15–16-year-old) classes in secondary schools in Australia (Johnston & Wildly, 2016). The disconnect between these data and the findings of the Schooling Review appears to arise from the review's focus on more formal practices of streaming, for example, academically selective secondary schools with examination-based admissions processes. This focus appears to minimise the more opaque but widespread practices of streaming that affect postsecondary pathways.

The focus of our study is the streaming that typically happens *within* schools, whereby students are divided into 'vocational' and 'university' pathways. In senior secondary school, the most common type of streaming involves eligibility to receive an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR provides secondary school students with a statewide rank on a scale of 0 to 99.95 and reflects their achievement aggregated across school subjects, with results contextualised for the perceived difficulty of subjects undertaken. ATAR streams serve as a proxy for higher education aspiration as universities typically select students based on their ranks (Joseph, 2023). Secondary students within non-ATAR streams, by contrast, usually pursue vocational education and training (VET) courses, apprenticeships, or direct employment. The division between university and vocational pathways is not strictly 'academic streaming' in the sense of students being grouped based on their current achievement or performance. However, there is a clear correlation between academic achievement and pathway chosen, with results of national testing in English, mathematics, and other disciplines (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN]) closely linked to ATAR attainment (Semo et al., 2024).

Our central research questions examine the nature and extent of secondary school streaming across Australia, and its implications for higher education growth and equity. In this paper, we investigate the practice of streaming across several Australian state jurisdictions, drawing on both publicly available and customised data. In particular, we seek to uncover the proportion of students in each state who are studying in non-ATAR streams, the proportion of Indigenous students in each state who are studying in non-ATAR streams, and the postsecondary outcomes of students within both streams. Our equity focus is primarily on Indigenous students, the group most highlighted in the Australian Universities Accord and the one for whom data were able to be sourced across multiple states. We also address the participation of low SES and regional, rural, and remote (RRR) students, though more limited data are available for these groups. We found no data available for students with a disability, which is the fourth priority group of the Australian Government (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, 2024), nor for a range of other marginalised groups such as

care-experienced students, Māori and/or Pasifika students, and people from refugee backgrounds. We address the implications of this paucity of data in our discussion.

Background

Australia operates a federal system of government with responsibilities divided between the Australian Government and a sub-national level, which includes six state and two territory governments (Harvey et al., 2025). While higher education is primarily funded and regulated by the Australian Government, primary and secondary school systems are largely funded and regulated at the state and territory level. Streaming in schools thus operates differently in each jurisdiction, and student data are kept at state and territory level through various curriculum and assessment authorities and tertiary admissions centres. Around 93 per cent of Australian higher education is delivered by universities and the terms are often used interchangeably (Brett et al., 2019).

Australian schools have a long history of dividing students into perceived ability-based classes, often justified on the basis that this is supported by data and evidence-informed practices that provide benefits for high achievers (Luke et al., 2013; Macqueen, 2011; Spina, 2019). Since the 1980s, however, streaming into ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ pathways has increased alongside school completion rates. The proportion of students completing the final year of schooling (Year 12) has doubled since the 1980s, requiring curricular and pedagogical adaptation to teach diverse cohorts who would previously have left school before completing Year 12 (Keating et al., 2012; Lamb et al., 2020; Shergold et al., 2020). Part of the adaptation has involved creating new vocationally oriented pathways within schools, along with pathways focussed on higher education. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) claims that 98 per cent of secondary schools in Australia utilise some form of streaming. The type and amount of streaming is determined at a school level and there are virtually no specific national or statewide policies or data (Johnston & Wildy, 2016; Spina, 2019). There are also no reported school-level data to understand these patterns. Year 12 completers typically receive a senior secondary school certificate, regardless of whether they have pursued a vocational or academic pathway.

Australian higher education enrolments have expanded rapidly since the 1980s alongside increases in secondary school completion, yet this growth has not been matched by proportional increases in the participation of marginalised students (Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008; Department of Education, 2024; Lamb et al., 2020). In response to increasingly diverse cohorts, universities have introduced a range of alternative admission pathways beyond the ATAR, including school recommendation schemes, early offers, portfolios, auditions, and VET qualifications (Shergold et al., 2020). Despite these pathways, which have themselves been scrutinised for their equity, validity, efficiency, and transparency (Harvey, 2014; Lamb et al., 2020; Polesel et al., 2021), the ATAR remains the dominant admissions tool, particularly for highly selective programs and for students entering directly from school (O’Connell et al., 2022). Between 2018 and 2022, around 60 per cent of school leavers were admitted solely on the basis of their ATAR, with a further 14 per cent admitted using ATAR plus additional criteria (Joseph, 2023). The ATAR continues to hold significant symbolic and practical influence in schools and the media as an indicator of educational success (O’Connell et al., 2022).

ATARs are commonly used as predictors of higher education success, with higher ATARs associated with increased completion rates and lower ATARs linked to higher attrition (Joseph, 2023; Pilcher et al., 2025). Despite these trends, universities have increasingly admitted students with relatively low ATARs, leading to rapid enrolment growth from 2010 onwards (Kemp & Norton, 2014). The proportion of offers made to applicants with ATARs below 50 rose from 18 per cent in 2011 to 55 per cent in 2021, indicating that even low ranks now provide access to higher education (Joseph, 2023). Nationally, just over half of Year 12 students receive an ATAR, though

attainment rates vary substantially between jurisdictions, from around 30 per cent in Western Australia and Tasmania to approximately 60 per cent in New South Wales, South Australia, and Victoria (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2023). Queensland, which adopted the ATAR in 2020, provides a unique opportunity to examine changes from the previous Overall Position model, which did not include externally moderated examinations.

Despite a paucity of publicly available data, existing evidence indicates that marginalised student groups are disproportionately represented in non-ATAR pathways (Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011; Firth, 2020; Pilcher et al., 2025; Welner & Oakes, 1996). This pattern is most visible where pathways are clearly demarcated, as was the case in Victoria until 2022, where the non-ATAR Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) operated alongside the ATAR-based Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Analysis of 2019 data in the Firth Review revealed that 42 per cent of Indigenous senior secondary students were enrolled in VCAL, compared to just 14 per cent of non-Indigenous students (Firth, 2020; Harvey et al., 2025). The review further found that regional and remote students, students with disability, and students from low SES backgrounds were also significantly over-represented in VCAL enrolments (Firth, 2020, p. 272). Following the Firth Review, the VCAL was phased out from 2023 and replaced by two non-ATAR pathways, the VCE Vocational Major and Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC), to strengthen vocational and applied learning pathways (Dollinger et al., 2022; Firth, 2020; Strathdee, 2024; Victorian Department of Education, 2026).

There is an increasing drive to align the VET and higher education sectors (Glover, 2024; Knight & Hodge, 2021) and to create a ‘parity of esteem’ between those two sectors. Despite the increasing language of alignment though, vocational and university pathways within secondary schools remain correlated with student SES and other geo-demographic characteristics. The aim of this study is to examine the scale and equity implications of senior secondary streaming across multiple Australian jurisdictions, with particular attention to its relationship to higher education access.

Method

Our research data were collected from a range of sources, including both publicly available data sets and requested custom government data as outlined in Appendix B. There was no uniformity of publicly available data or of responses to requests for custom data across the states. The data collection process varied for each state depending on the availability of data.

Publicly available data on ATAR attainment for secondary students in 2022, including disaggregated data for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, were accessed for Western Australia and Queensland. Publicly available data on postsecondary outcomes were also accessed for Queensland (Queensland Department of Education, 2023). Customised data for ATAR attainment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were requested from Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria, the four most populous states. Our analysis of specific ATAR equity data is confined to Indigenous peoples because of data limitations. The states and territories do not publish school data on the proportion of low SES or RRR students, nor on those with a disability, who are enrolled within vocational or higher education streams or who receive an ATAR (with the exception of older VCAL data cited previously). As outlined below, some inferences can nevertheless be made about low SES and RRR student pathways from analysis of postsecondary survey data in Victoria and Queensland. In addition to the ATAR data sought, we analysed the results of two annual student surveys. In Queensland, Next Step is an annual, voluntary survey completed 6 months after finishing Year 12. Data were collected in 2022 for Year 12 students who completed their studies in 2021, and the survey response rate was 76.9 per cent (Queensland Department of Education, 2023). In Victoria, the On Track annual survey follows the destination outcomes for Victorian Year 12 completers and is administered 6 months after leaving

school. We were able to disaggregate the Queensland survey results geographically, providing a picture of pathways participation and ATAR attainment within low SES and RRR areas. These results provide an indirect but helpful proxy for low SES and RRR student participation and attainment, notwithstanding the necessary caveats around survey participation rates and individual socioeconomic diversity within ‘low SES’ areas.

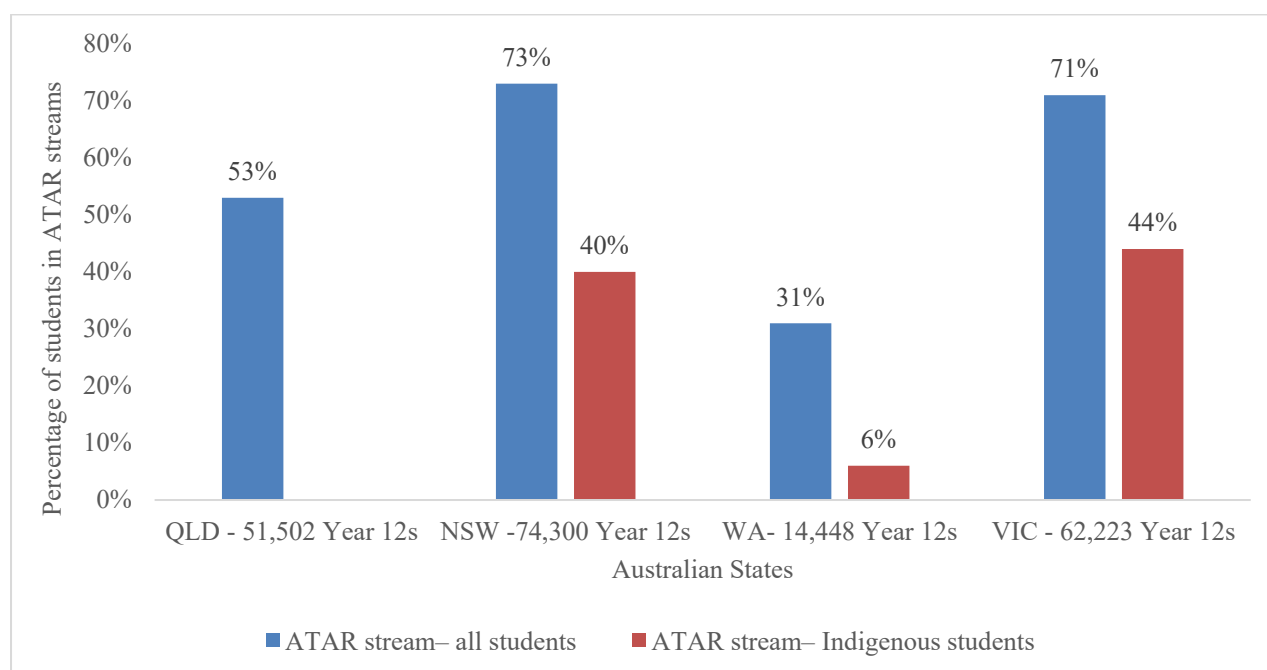
Results

ATAR participation

The available data from four states regarding ATAR rates for 2022 are shown in Figure 1. As the data highlight, in 2022, approximately half (53 per cent) of Queensland Year 12 students received an ATAR (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2023). Western Australia recorded the lowest ATAR participation rate overall at 31 per cent and had the lowest rates of Indigenous ATAR participation (6 per cent) in 2022 (Western Australian Department of Education, 2023a). The rates of ATAR participation for Indigenous students in Queensland are not publicly available and were not provided upon request, as reflected in Figure 1. New South Wales and Victoria recorded similar rates of ATAR attainment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Figure 1

Proportion of Year 12 Students in ATAR Streams in 2022



Note. Queensland, New South Wales, and Victorian data record ATAR attainment upon completion of Year 12. Western Australian data records ATAR participation in Year 12 as at census, Semester 2. No data were provided for the ATAR rates of Indigenous students in Queensland. See Appendix A for data sources.

Gaps in ATAR attainment are broader than gaps in attainment of the senior secondary school certificate, though they are clearly related. As shown in Table 1, in New South Wales, only half of the Indigenous students who completed the senior secondary certificate (Higher School Certificate [HSC]) attained an ATAR in 2022. Conversely, the majority of non-Indigenous students who completed the HSC attained an ATAR (Universities Admissions Centre, 2022).

Table 1*Proportion of New South Wales Year 12 Students Attaining an ATAR*

ATAR	2020		2021		2022	
Indigeneity	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Total Year 12 students	2,653	72,387	2,117	73,069	2,089	72,211
ATAR attainment	42.8%	74.2%	42%	73.8%	40.3%	74%
HSC completion	85.4%	88.9%	83.2%	88.8%	80.2%	88%

(Universities Admissions Centre, 2022)

Table 2 shows data from Western Australia. Unlike in New South Wales, the majority of Indigenous Year 12 students in Western Australia do not attain the senior secondary certificate (Western Australian Certificate of Education [WACE]), and only 5.8 per cent of Indigenous Year 12 students were in the ATAR stream in 2022. Non-Indigenous ATAR participation is also relatively low (30 per cent in 2022), though most non-Indigenous students do attain their senior secondary certificate. Tables 2 and 3 also highlight the changes in ATAR participation in New South Wales and Western Australia over time, from 2020 to 2022. Data indicate that ATAR attainment and participation in these states dropped each year for Indigenous students (Universities Admissions Centre, 2022; Western Australian Department of Education, 2023a).

Table 2*Proportion of Western Australian Year 12 Students in ATAR Streams*

ATAR	2020		2021		2022	
Indigeneity	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Total Year 12 Students	787	13,790	752	13,960	827	13,621
ATAR participation	7.2%	35%	6.0%	34.7%	5.8%	30.2%
WACE completion	46.0%	83%	42.6%	79.9%	41.4%	78.0%

(Western Australian Department of Education, 2023a)

Postsecondary outcomes

As outlined in the methods section, Queensland and Victoria are the only states that currently collect data on the destinations of secondary school leavers, with both states running voluntary surveys completed by school leavers after they have completed Year 12. The following data from both states reveal outcomes for students who completed Year 12 in 2021 and responded to surveys in 2022.

Queensland

In Queensland, Next Step is an annual, voluntary survey completed 6 months after finishing Year 12, with an overall response rate of 76.9 per cent in 2022 (Queensland Department of Education, 2023). The response rate for Indigenous Year 12 students in 2022 was 61.2 per cent (Queensland Department of Education, 2023). Notably, responses reveal that 65.1 per cent of all respondents who completed Year 12 in 2021 with an ATAR were enrolled in a Bachelor degree at a higher education institution in 2022. By contrast, very few (5.2 per cent) of the equivalent non-ATAR respondents were enrolled in a Bachelor degree. This gap reveals the extent to which the ATAR

stream is perceived as a higher education pathway. Conversely, very few non-ATAR students appear to be transitioning directly to university, despite the range of alternative admissions pathways offered.

As expected, students who completed Year 12 without an ATAR were much more likely to be undertaking an apprenticeship (17 per cent) or employed in either part-time or full-time work (43 per cent). Notably though, students from the non-ATAR stream were over four times more likely (5.2 per cent vs. 1.2 per cent) to be ‘not in the labour force, education or training’ (NILFET) at all.

Table 3

Main Destination of Year 12 Completers by ATAR, from the Queensland Next Step Survey, 2022

Main destination	ATAR stream		Non-ATAR stream		Percentage of all survey respondents
Bachelor degree	14,988	65.10%	865	5.20%	40.10%
VET Certs I-IV	1,434	6.20%	2,132	12.90%	9.00%
Apprenticeship/Traineeship	949	4.10%	3,592	21.70%	11.50%
Working or seeking work	5,348	23.30%	9,070	54.90%	36.50%
NILFET	287	1.20%	851	5.20%	2.90%
Total	23,006	100%	16,510	100%	100%

(Queensland Department of Education, 2023)

While no systematic analysis has been conducted to formally identify any correlations between low SES students and ATAR pathways, some data suggest that low SES students may be over-represented within non-ATAR streams. For example, Next Step survey data for Logan, an urban area in the lowest socioeconomic quartile of Queensland, which also includes the highest proportion of Māori and Pasifika people of any local government area in Australia, indicated 57 per cent of survey respondents undertook non-ATAR pathways (Queensland Department of Education, 2023).

Victoria

Of the 63,298 Victorian Year 12 students of 2021, 13,701 (22 per cent) completed the On Track survey (Victorian Department of Education, 2023c). Of the 628 Indigenous Year 12 students that year (First Peoples - State Relations, 2024), 47 per cent responded to the survey (Victorian Department of Education, 2023b). Given the lower survey response rates, results require more cautious treatment than the Queensland data. Indeed, one question raised by our analysis is why postsecondary data remain so poor nationally, with only two states operating surveys and only one of those receiving strong response rates. Importantly also, this Victorian survey was conducted before the transition away from VCAL. Nevertheless, results are notable in showing the divisions between academic and vocational pathways.

On Track surveys completed in 2022 suggest that most VCAL completers pursued VET, apprenticeships, or direct employment pathways. Fewer than one per cent of VCAL respondents continued directly on to university. Given this stream included nearly half of the Indigenous Year 12 students and high proportions of low SES and other marginalised students, the flow-on effect to higher education participation and equity is likely to be significant. The survey showed that 29 per cent of Indigenous Year 12 completers who completed the VCE VET pathway went on to enrol in a Bachelor degree, compared to 40 per cent of non-Indigenous students (Victorian Department of Education, 2023a). Only 42.2 per cent of Indigenous student survey respondents who undertook the ATAR stream (VCE non-VET) enrolled in a Bachelor degree, compared with 63.2 per cent of non-Indigenous survey respondents (Victorian Department of Education, 2023a). The Firth Review

identified numerous weaknesses within VCAL (Firth, 2020) and the new certificate structures are designed to address many of these issues and improve student choice.

Discussion

Vocational streams in school are designed to increase student choice and to lead primarily to postsecondary pathways such as apprenticeships, direct employment, and further VET study. The introduction of such streams has coincided with a rise in senior school completion rates and provided more subject options for students with both academic and vocational aspirations. Nevertheless, there is a need to interrogate the influences upon student choice and the broader postsecondary outcomes that result from the widespread practice of streaming. Research suggests a need for growing mobility between vocational and higher education sectors and a need for an increase in university graduates to meet future skills needs (Department of Education, 2024). From a student perspective, higher education graduates also continue to command a substantial lifetime wage premium over other workers (OECD, 2025) notwithstanding well-documented skills shortages (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025). It is thus important that university remains an accessible option to secondary students regardless of their career aspirations in Year 10, the point at which most streaming decisions are made.

To support the university aspirations of non-ATAR students, a multitude of alternative entry pathways have been designed, including schedules that equate vocational certificates to ATARs (TAFE Queensland, n.d.). However, our study confirms that a large proportion of Australian secondary school students are in non-ATAR streams, including high numbers of marginalised students, and that those streams are very unlikely to lead directly to university. Data show by ages 22–25, non-ATAR students are less likely to have completed a Certificate III or higher and less likely to have attained Bachelor or higher qualifications compared to ATAR students (Misko et al., 2020).

Despite the proliferation of alternative university admission pathways, these pathways are not widely used by non-ATAR school leavers in their initial postsecondary transitions. Further, when students do enrol at university through non-ATAR pathways, they tend to record lower success and retention rates than ATAR-track students (Li et al., 2022), reflecting differences in curriculum and academic preparation.

Although streaming practices are common across states and territories, the extent and effects of this streaming vary substantially and reflect a federal system of curricular complexity (O'Connor et al., 2025). The correlation of non-ATAR study and non-university transition is consistent nationally, but there are important differences across states and territories and across demographic groups. We found substantial variation in the rates of streaming among states, with nearly half of senior Queensland school students and an even higher proportion of students in Western Australia selecting non-ATAR tracks. While these differences remain under-explored, there are historic curriculum differences between 'progressive' and 'conservative' states (O'Connor et al., 2025) and, in the case of Western Australia and Queensland, distinctions as historically strong resource states with a focus on related employment and vocational training. Relatedly, over 50 per cent of secondary students in Queensland study some VET programs while in schools (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2024). There may also be more pragmatic reasons for streaming in a competitive education environment. Authors have also argued that many Western Australian schools set targets to increase median ATAR results and funnel low scoring students away from ATAR pathways to protect school ATAR rankings (Vernon, 2023), though this practice is also likely in other states. Whatever the system motivations for streaming, it is notable that Western Australia and Queensland record both the highest proportions of students in non-ATAR streams and the lowest rates of university participation of the mainland states (Queensland Tertiary Admissions

Centre, 2023; Western Australian Department of Education, 2023b). The current practices of streaming limit the potential for higher education growth, particularly in those states where non-ATAR streams are most prevalent.

More than system growth, however, it is student equity within higher education that is curtailed by the effects of school streaming on postsecondary choices. Our analysis confirms that Indigenous students are studying in non-ATAR pathways at much higher rates than non-Indigenous students. Available Queensland data also reveal that low SES and RRR students appear to be more likely than others to select non-ATAR pathways (Delahunty, 2022; Krause et al., 2009; Queensland Department of Education, 2023). Given the relationship between non-ATAR and non-university transition, substantial improvements in higher education equity are unlikely without reform of secondary school streaming. University participation of low SES, RRR, and Indigenous students has remained well below population parity since data were first collected in the late 1980s (Harvey et al., 2016). This continuing under-representation largely reflects the way that students select ‘higher education’ and ‘vocational’ pathways within schools.

Little is known about the specific motivations of, and influences upon, students who choose ATAR or non-ATAR pathways in school. We have scarce qualitative data on the extent to which streaming decisions are the result of informed student choice. However, existing research suggests that secondary students’ understanding of university pathways and admissions requirements is limited (Harvey et al., 2016), and that attainment of an ATAR is highly correlated with prior achievement in NAPLAN tests (Semo et al., 2024). More student-centred analysis is an important area of further research to be undertaken. Prior academic achievement and gender strongly influence streaming choice, with female students nearly twice as likely as male students to attain an ATAR (Semo et al., 2024). The gender gap is partly explained by workforce outcomes, with male VET completers receiving greater wage premiums than female VET completers (Jobs and Skills Australia, n.d.). Australian parental expectations and norms (e.g., whether parents attended university), cultural expectations, teacher views, opportunity, awareness of options, and access to resources (James, 2000) are other factors affecting student choice. Students from low SES backgrounds and those living in RRR areas may also have less access to university from a financial and geographic perspective, which impacts decision making around career paths, regardless of academic ability (Devlin & McKay, 2018; James, 2001).

Once students select non-ATAR pathways, research suggests that teachers often have lower academic expectations of those students (Johnston et al., 2022; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). This argument is further advanced by the Behrendt Review, which found that Indigenous students are often steered towards VET qualifications (Behrendt et al., 2012). The review found that “many teachers have low expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ academic skill and potential, which can affect how students are taught and the options they are presented and may affect their aspirations to pursue higher education” (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 14). Further interrogation of streaming practices in schools, including their effect on postsecondary outcomes, Indigenous students, and other marginalised groups, is critical.

Another major finding of our study is the need for better and more transparent data. On transparency, one of the priority areas identified in the national Closing the Gap report is to improve data collection and data sharing to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make informed decisions and engage in policy consultations (Australian Government, 2020). Indigenous data on educational outcomes and pathways are collected at a national level and across all states and territories. Each state included in this paper had a different system for the release of ATAR data. The process of requesting and obtaining Indigenous data for several states was difficult and time-intensive, where the release of de-identified data on ATAR and educational certificates could be made available routinely.

Greater transparency is thus required in relation to existing data sources. However, there also remain important data gaps around postsecondary outcomes, and across a range of marginalised groups. We have advocated elsewhere the need for a national focus on school transitions and postsecondary outcomes, beyond the limited surveys currently run in two states (Harvey et al., 2023). Equally, we have little student-centred research on the practices of school streaming by regionality, SES, gender, or other major demographic factors.

Conclusion

Raising overall higher education growth and meeting equity targets relies on reform of the secondary school sector. As our study demonstrates, non-ATAR students very rarely transition directly to higher education. Non-ATAR students also have lower overall success rates than other students when they do transition to university (Joseph, 2023), and higher rates of initial unemployment than ATAR streamed students (Queensland Department of, 2023). Streaming is designed to promote student choice and we would expect most non-ATAR streamed students to pursue vocational education and pathways. However, the extent, nature, and outcomes of streaming are problematic, and the practice is likely reinforcing stereotypes and contributing to unequal postsecondary outcomes. While intended to promote student choice, the implementation of streaming has led to a highly bifurcated system that creates challenges for both the vocational and higher education systems, including hindering attempts to foster mobility and parity of esteem between the sectors. These are broader challenges outside the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that the social and economic impacts of school streaming extend beyond the concerns of higher education equity and growth.

The lack of publicly available data around the extent of ATAR streaming and the postsecondary outcomes of students, including Indigenous and other marginalised groups, is concerning and limiting to the analysis of policy efficacy. There remains a need for further research into student motivations and influences on pathway choice. Redressing the inequities of streaming relies on more transparent data (both at school and throughout university), more mobility between vocational and higher education streams, reform of the ATAR, cultural and curricular reform within schools, and better understanding of the motivations and knowledge of students who choose the different streams.

Statements and declarations

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Ethics statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No. 2023/305).

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Appendix A: Data sources for Figure 1 proportion of Year 12 students in ATAR streams in 2022

States	Total number of enrolled Year 12 students	ATAR stream — all students	ATAR stream — Indigenous students
QLD	51,502 ¹	53% ¹	N.D. ²
NSW	74,300 ³	73% ³	40% ³
WA	14,448 ⁴	31% ⁴	6% ⁴
VIC	62,223 ⁵	71% ^{6 7}	44% ^{6 8}

Sources

1. Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2022.
2. Data were requested from Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) and Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA); however, these data were not provided. The Queensland Next Step survey report is included in Table 3 and sets out Indigenous ATAR data.
3. Universities Admissions Centre, 2022.
4. Western Australian Department of Education, 2023a.
5. Victorian Department of Education, 2022.
6. Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2022.
7. Victorian Department of Education 2023a.
8. First Peoples - State Relations, 2024.

Appendix B: Data availability and responses to requests by state

State	Institution	Data	Requested/publicly available
Qld	Qld Tertiary Admissions Centre	- Number of non-Indigenous ATAR recipients for 2020–2022 - Number of Indigenous ATAR recipients and total number of Indigenous Year 12 students 2020–2022 - Publicly available data for total ATAR eligibility included in QTAC ATAR reports	Requested — not provided
	Queensland Curriculum Assessment Authority	- Number of ATAR recipients for 2020–2022 - Number of Indigenous ATAR recipients and total number of Indigenous Year 12 students 2020–2022	Requested — not provided
	Next Step	Postsecondary outcomes of Indigenous students based on ATAR status	Publicly available data obtained — in addition, custom data received for 2010–2022
WA	WA Department of Education	- Number of ATAR recipients for 2020–2023 - Number of Indigenous ATAR recipients and total number of Indigenous Year 12 students 2020–2023	Custom data received
	Western Australian Department of Education annual reports	Median ATAR results Indigenous and non-Indigenous	Publicly available
NSW	Universities Admissions Centre (UAC)	- Number of ATAR recipients for 2020–2022 - Number of Indigenous ATAR recipients and total number of Indigenous Year 12 students 2020–2022 - Median ATAR of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students	Custom data received
NSW	NSW Department of Education	Total number of Year 12 students	Publicly available data
Vic	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)	- Number of Indigenous students in Victoria who graduated Year 12, 2020–2022 - Number of non-Indigenous students who graduated Year 12, 2020–2022 - Number of non-Indigenous students in Victoria who received a VCE and VCAL 2020–2022 - Number of Indigenous students who received a VCE and VCAL 2020–2022 - Number of Indigenous students awarded a Cert 1–IV, diploma, and advanced diploma 2020–2022 - Number of non-Indigenous students awarded a Cert 1–IV, diploma, and advanced diploma 2020–2022	Partial custom data received. Unable to provide totals of Indigenous or non-Indigenous Year 12 students or disaggregate VCE, VCAL, etc.
	Vic Department of Education	All schools FTE enrolments — Feb 2022, Victoria	Publicly available
	Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report (VGAAR)	Publicly available data on number of Indigenous students that received a VCAL, VCE, or VET up to 2021	Publicly available
	Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC)	The number and percentage of Indigenous students who received an ATAR in 2022	Custom request received

		• The number and percentage of non-Indigenous students who received an ATAR in 2022 • Median ATAR for Indigenous students in 2022 • Median ATAR for non-Indigenous students in 2022	
	On Track (survey)	• Requested 2022 data on Year 12 completers' postsecondary destinations — Indigenous and non-Indigenous	Custom request received