



Department of
Education

Shaping the future

Pathways to Post-School Success

Review of Western Australian senior secondary pathways

Discussion paper

24 October 2023

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Chair's foreword

A strong senior secondary education system is of vital importance, both for students and for the Western Australian community and economy. In a rapidly changing world, it is more critical than ever that young people leave school with the skills and knowledge they need to enter the world of work, engage as active citizens and be prepared for the challenges of post-school life. For government, the education sector, industry and broader society, senior secondary pathways merit close attention.

WA already delivers strong senior secondary pathways that work well for many students – but of course, there are also challenges. As this paper explores, for some students, current pathway options may not be providing effective preparation for the full range of available future options. Additionally, WA is a diverse state covering a vast geography and ensuring equitable access to senior secondary pathways across different geographic areas, and for diverse cohorts of students, is no small feat.

In light of this, the Expert Panel has been asked to examine reform options for WA's system of senior secondary pathways. We recognise the gravity of this task, and are undertaking a comprehensive, inclusive process accordingly. We are drawing from lessons learned in Australian and international jurisdictions, as well as data and other evidence on how the current system is working in WA. We are also fortunate to be able to draw from the environmental scan undertaken by the Pathways to Post-School Success Secretariat between May-September 2023, which garnered contributions from over 1,600 stakeholders around the state.

The discussion paper is an important step in the review process. It sets out draft objectives that the Expert Panel has developed to guide our work; presents initial analysis on how the system is currently working in WA; and poses key discussion questions for feedback from stakeholders. Senior secondary pathways have wide-ranging implications for many stakeholders, so we have made the discussion paper publicly available to anyone who may wish to read it and provide comment.

On behalf of the Expert Panel, I would like to thank you for your engagement with the discussion paper. I look forward to hearing your insights and ideas, which will contribute to a strengthened senior secondary system to meet the needs of WA and its students.

Emeritus Professor Bill Loudon
Chair, Expert Panel

Introduction

Background

Senior secondary education is an opportunity to prepare students for pathways post-school. Western Australian (WA) senior secondary students range in location, backgrounds, and aspirations. Post-school opportunities for students are equally broad and the pathways chosen relate to decisions made during senior secondary education.

On 21 July 2023, the Cook Government launched the Pathways to Post-School Success (PPSS) review of senior secondary school pathways. The review aims to ensure all WA students reach their full potential through post-school study, training or employment pursuits.

The Minister for Education, the Hon Dr Tony Buti MLA, announced the review would explore whether current pathway options are effectively preparing students for the full range of further study, training, and work options available to them. A key outcome of the review will be to investigate whether certification and university entry requirements assist students to make the best study choices, as well as to identify the barriers to students being able to access equitable pathways. The review will be completed by a panel of education specialists including principals and tertiary education leaders (the 'Expert Panel'). A larger Advisory Committee, representing key stakeholder groups, will work with the Expert Panel and provide direction for the review.

The review will also explore options that will embed a more sustainable connection between WA's schooling system and further education, work and training needs. The review aims to develop a cross-sectoral, interagency, shared, long-term commitment to improve the way schools and agencies work together to address major challenges and provide opportunities to pathways and success for all students.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to present initial thinking from the Expert Panel and invite stakeholder views on this important issue. The paper sets out draft objectives that the Expert Panel has developed to guide its work; presents initial analysis on how the system is currently working in WA; and poses key discussion questions for feedback from stakeholders. The Expert Panel will draw on the insights and ideas provided through stakeholder responses to the discussion paper as it prepares the reform options and recommendations included in its final report to the Minister for Education by February 2024.

Data sources

This discussion paper draws on earlier research:

- Analysis of existing data provided by the WA Department of Education, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (the Authority) (with authority from the Catholic and Independent sectors where required) and the Tertiary Institutions Service Centre (TISC) on the WA senior secondary system.
- A review of senior secondary systems in select Australian and international jurisdictions.
- An environmental scan of senior secondary education in WA.

A reference list and acronyms and abbreviations list are included as appendices to this document.

Responding to the discussion paper

We welcome submissions to the discussion paper from all interested stakeholders.

All submissions are to be made using an online form on the PPSS website at <https://www.pathwaysreview.wa.edu.au/review-discussion-paper>.

Your submission may address any or all discussion questions and include any other relevant information. If you prefer to submit your feedback in a different format, you can choose to upload your own written submission instead.

Submissions can be made either individually or on behalf of your organisation, including your school or other educational institution. Where you make a submission on behalf of your organisation you are confirming that you have the authority to do so.

Submissions will close on **8 December 2023 (was 17 November)**.

What does good look like?

The purpose of senior secondary education

There is no single agreed purpose of senior secondary schooling and what it means for senior secondary schooling to have successful outcomes. Across the education sector, different stakeholders place different levels of emphasis on particular objectives of schooling at the senior levels – including successful transitions to further study and work, skill development and civic engagement. The *Looking to the Future: Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training* argues that education ‘must prepare young people both for active citizenship in a democratic society and for purposeful engagement with the labour market’.¹

Today’s senior secondary education systems must adapt to emerging developments in the broader society. Students today face an extensive range of challenges due to technological change, globalisation and automation. These challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a rise in mental ill-health amongst students and an increased focus on wellbeing by schools. Current students will need a broader and different mix of skills compared to previous generations. As stated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, education should be: ‘A foundation for further learning and adult life, [where] the curriculum includes practical skills development in areas such as [information and communications technology], critical and creative thinking, intercultural understanding and problem solving. These skills support imagination, discovery, innovation, empathy and developing creative solutions to complex problems. They are central to contributing to Australia’s knowledge-based economy.’² Finally, senior secondary education systems must ensure all students, including those with a disability, can access education, are meaningfully included in education systems, and are supported to transition to further education and / or employment, as highlighted by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.³

Objectives set by the Expert Panel

System design and reform require balancing of trade-offs between different design objectives. There is no one system that can perfectly achieve all objectives at once. In considering what a strengthened senior secondary system for WA could look like, the Expert Panel identified a set of draft objectives. Because system design requires the balancing of trade-offs, efforts to strengthen WA’s system requires the Expert Panel to weigh these objectives against each other (e.g. if considering efforts to improve course offerings to better ‘reflect diversity and uniqueness’, this objective would need to be weighed against the objective of ‘finding achievable solutions’).

¹ Education Council, ‘Looking to the future: Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training’, 12.

² Australian Government Department of Education, “The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration”, February 2020, <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>.

³ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, ‘Executive Summary, Our vision for an inclusive Australia and Recommendations’, 89.

The draft objectives that the Expert Panel has set out to guide its approach to senior secondary system reform are:

1. **Providing effective pathways** - Ensuring the system enables students to transition into a range of training / education options, depending on their needs, and reflecting the needs of industry.
2. **Reflecting diversity and uniqueness** - Acknowledging that students will not only have different starting points, trajectories, aspirations, and particular needs (for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; students with disability; students from regional / remote areas; students from low-socio-economic backgrounds); but also have a range of skills, interests, and attributes that reflect their diversity and uniqueness.
3. **Promoting learning and relevance** - Maximising learning and growth during late secondary.
4. **Optimising student engagement** - Supporting students to remain engaged with education and training.
5. **Ensuring system integrity** - Making sure the system has equitable, fair, and transparent checks and balances.
6. **Finding achievable solutions** - Identifying approaches that can be successfully implemented and scalable in practice.

In addition to these objectives, the Expert Panel has heard a lot about the **importance of positive wellbeing** for senior secondary students. Having a senior secondary system that focuses on student interest and skills, as outlined above, will go some way to support student wellbeing. However, there are additional considerations around the mechanics of a senior secondary system that can impact student wellbeing, such as assessment and pathway options. Depending on stakeholder views, 'supporting student wellbeing' could be considered either a pre-condition to 'optimising student engagement', or a separate objective in its own right.

Q1 What is the purpose of senior secondary schooling? What does it look like when senior secondary schooling succeeds?

Q2 Are the objectives set out by the Expert Panel the right ones?

Q3 Are there other important objectives that have not been identified? If so, what?

Q4 How should the Expert Panel weigh these objectives? Which are the most important?

Q5 What is the role of wellbeing in senior secondary education? Should the Expert Panel treat it as a separate objective, or a pre-condition to 'optimising student engagement'?

System decisions

Key features of the WA education system

WA has a good senior secondary system, demonstrating flexibility, rigour and transparency. However, there are some challenges – including differences in outcomes based on location, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, disability status, and school Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score.⁴

The WA education system has 1,144 schools and 484,850 students across three sectors: government, independent and Catholic. Most students study in government schools (66% of students). The remaining students study in independent and Catholic schools.⁵ The Authority offers senior secondary pathways on the same basis to all sectors.

WA is the largest Australian jurisdiction by size. There are eight education regions in WA: Goldfields, Kimberley, Midwest, North Metropolitan, South Metropolitan, Pilbara, Southwest and Wheatbelt. In WA, the majority (81%) of secondary students study in metropolitan schools and the remainder (19%) study in ‘country’ schools including rural, regional and remote schools.⁶ WA has the highest level of remote population distribution in Australia after the Northern Territory.⁷ This means that education must be provided to some of the most remote locations in Australia. Schools in these areas may face greater challenges in resourcing for staff and other learning supports e.g. adequate internet access or devices for students. Many of these schools aim to meet the education needs of remote Aboriginal communities. More isolated schools can also struggle to engage with post-school pathways e.g. TAFEs or universities given their distance from these institutions.

WA’s reform journey

Introduction of the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) (2010)

In 2010, the WACE was introduced as the standard academic examination for school leavers in WA. The WACE replaced the Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE) which was used to determine a rank and score to determine eligibility for entrance to state tertiary institutions. The purpose of the WACE was to establish one consistent standard for all students across the state and ensure all stakeholders receive meaningful information about a student’s achievement.⁸

Introduction of literacy and numeracy requirement (2013–2016)

In 2013, WA announced the introduction of a literacy and numeracy requirement for students completing Year 12 to achieve the WACE. The requirement was introduced because of significant concerns around the standards of literacy and numeracy achieved by students completing a WACE. The literacy and numeracy requirement is a demonstration of skills regarded as essential to meet the demands of everyday life and work in a knowledge-based economy. These skills are described in Level 3 of the Australian Core Skills Framework.

⁴ ICSEA is developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students.

⁵ Department of Education Western Australia, “Annual Report 2022-23”, 2023, <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/dl/rqozq6z>

⁶ Western Australian Government Department of Education, “Summary statistics of schools and full-time students: Semester 1, 2023”, 2023, <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/school-data-and-performance>.

⁷ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, “Western Australian government (public) schools”, 2014, https://myschool.edu.au/media/1323/2014_wa_financial_limitations.pdf.

⁸ Western Australian Legislative Assembly Education and Health Standing Committee, “Interim report on the changes to the post compulsory curriculum in Western Australia”, 2005, [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID\)/FFE84980F2ED28D948257831003E9670/\\$file/Interim%20Report%20-%20December%202005.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID)/FFE84980F2ED28D948257831003E9670/$file/Interim%20Report%20-%20December%202005.pdf).

Students can prequalify by demonstrating their skills through their Year 9 NAPLAN reading, writing and numeracy tests. Students that do not prequalify with their NAPLAN scores must complete the Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (OLNA) by Year 12. There are multiple options for students to take the OLNA. The initial impact of this reform was a large drop in WACE achievement rates for Year 12 students in 2016: around 10% of students were failing to graduate with a WACE, which was significantly lower than the five-year average of 3%.⁹

Reforms to course options ('Stage' system abandoned) (2015–2016)

From 2015–2016, WA also implemented reforms to improve alignment of course options with the senior secondary Australian Curriculum. Prior to these reforms, the course options were three 'Stages' increasing in difficulty per stage. There was concern that a disproportionate number of students were enrolled in Stage 1 courses, which suggested students were not undertaking courses commensurate with their ability. The 'Stage' system was replaced by new WACE course types, giving students the option of undertaking ATAR, General, Foundation or Preliminary courses (instead of 'Stage 1, 2 and 3' courses). In addition to these reforms, the Authority also introduced a breadth and depth requirement for the achievement of the WACE.

Introduction of WACE General Pathway (2020–2021)

In 2020–2021, WA introduced the WACE General Pathway, which allows students to study five general courses to complete their WACE (as an alternative to achieving the WACE by taking four ATAR courses; or achieving a VET certification in combination with ATAR, General or Foundation courses). The other requirements to achieve a WACE remained the same. This pathway was introduced to give students more WACE achievement options, and to address concerns that some students were not being challenged enough through VET and had no other course options other than ATAR subjects if they wished to achieve the WACE.

⁹ The West Australian, 'Nearly 40 per cent leaving WA public education without Western Australian Certificate of Education', 2017, <https://thewest.com.au/news/education/nearly-40-per-cent-leaving-wa-public-education-without-western-australian-certificate-of-education-ng-b88693499z>

How the WA system works

Course and program options

There are six types of courses and program options available for senior secondary students in WA. They are:¹⁰

- **ATAR courses** – Student results in ATAR courses are used by TISC to calculate a student's ATAR score.
- **General courses** – General courses are for students who are typically aiming to enter further vocationally based training or the workforce straight from school.
- **VET industry specific courses** – These courses include a full VET qualification and mandatory workplace learning. VET industry specific courses contribute towards the WACE as course units. VET industry specific courses are for students aiming to enter further vocational training or the workforce straight from school.
 - *Note: VET qualifications undertaken separate to a VET industry specific course may contribute to the WACE through credit transfer. Qualifications undertaken as VET credit transfer contribute to the WACE as unit equivalents and may be used to meet the Certificate II or higher requirement.*
- **Endorsed programs** – These programs provide access to areas of learning not covered by WACE courses or VET programs and contribute to the WACE as unit equivalents. **Endorsed** programs are for students wishing to participate in programs which are delivered in a variety of settings by schools, workplaces, universities and community organisations.
- **Foundation courses** – Designed for students who need support to achieve the minimum **standards** for literacy and / or numeracy. These courses provide a focus on functional literacy and numeracy skills, practical work-related experience and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work. Foundation courses are not designed, nor intended, to be an alternative senior secondary pathway.
- **Preliminary courses** – Preliminary courses are for students who have been identified as having a learning difficulty and / or an intellectual disability. Preliminary courses do not contribute to achievement of the WACE.

Assessment¹¹

Assessment differs by course and program type. A key distinction between ATAR courses and other course types is that to complete a Year 12 ATAR course a student must sit the ATAR course examination administered by the Authority. Externally administered examinations are not a requirement of other types of courses. General courses are not externally assessed by examinations, however each have an external task set by the Authority. The final score is a combination of school-based achievement and the externally set tasks mark. Students completing VET industry specific courses are assessed through various assessment methods, including practical assessment, written tasks and portfolios. Endorsed programs are assessed on a completed / non-completed basis by a registered provider. Foundation and Preliminary units are completed and reported by the school to the Authority.

Qualifications¹²

Senior secondary students in WA have several options regarding qualification pathways:

- The WACE is a senior secondary certificate recognised nationally in the Australian Qualifications Framework. The WACE is awarded to students who have successfully

¹⁰ Western Australia Department of Education, "Curriculum- Summary of course and program types", <https://student.scsa.wa.edu.au/curriculum>.

¹¹ Western Australia Department of Education, "The WACE 2022", 2022, <https://student.scsa.wa.edu.au/curriculum>.

¹² Ibid.

completed two years of senior secondary schooling and have achieved the required standard. This requires:

- At least 20 units which must comprise of at least:
 - 10 Year 12 (ATAR, General) or equivalent (VET qualifications, Endorsed programs)
 - 4 English units (ATAR or General), with at least 2 English units in Year 12
 - 2 list A units (ATAR or General), and 2 list B units (ATAR or General)
- An *achievement* of:
 - At least 14 C-grades across units (ATAR, General, VET qualifications, Endorsed programs), with a minimum of 6 C-grades in Year 12, or
 - At least 5 General units (or maximum of 3x ATAR units and additional General units), or
 - Cert II or higher + combination of other units (ATAR, General, Foundation)
- *Demonstration* of the literacy and numeracy standard
 - Either through Year 9 NAPLAN score or the OLNA
- The ATAR is a rank between 0.0 and 99.95 which indicates a student's position relative to other school leavers in Australia. Students that undertake four or more ATAR courses are eligible to receive an ATAR. The ATAR is the main way students are measured for entry into most university programs in Australia. The ATAR is a national ranking, however the method of calculating ATAR differs in each state.
- Senior secondary students can also complete VET qualifications at a Certificate II or higher level. These qualifications are nationally recognised in the Australian Qualifications Framework and prepare students for further training or for entry into the workforce.

These options are not mutually exclusive. Students achieving an ATAR would typically also achieve a WACE. Students can also count their achievement of a VET Certificate II or higher (combined with General, ATAR or Foundation courses) toward a WACE. At present, VET achievement cannot be counted toward ATAR in WA.

Record of student learning¹³

Students who have completed any course unit, VET unit of competency or endorsed program will, at the end of Year 12, receive a Western Australian Statement of Student Achievement (WASSA). The WASSA is a cumulative record of student achievement (though studies undertaken but not completed are not reported).

Access to post-secondary pathways

Most universities in WA have ATAR as the main entry pathway. However, each university has different acceptance criteria based on student circumstances. For example, students can often complete courses provided by the university to secure a place at the university. Some universities provide early offers which allows entry to current Year 12 students based on Year 10 or 11 results. Anecdotally, we heard that WA universities have increased early entry in the last few years. TISC data from the last 2 years indicates that early offers made up 48% of all university offers for the 2022 admission year, however trend data is not available.

Entry into post-school VET pathways can continue from VET courses completed in school. For example, if students complete a Certificate III at school, they can continue to Certificate IV of that subject post school. Requirements vary based on the course, with some having particular prerequisites e.g., higher mathematics or higher English.

¹³ Western Australia Department of Education, "The WACE 2022", 2022, <https://student.scsa.wa.edu.au/curriculum>.

Reform in other jurisdictions

The Expert Panel has considered examples of senior secondary reform in other Australian and international jurisdictions. While other jurisdictions are at different stages of their reform journey, and have taken diverse approaches to reform, some noteworthy areas of convergence include:

- **Introducing increased flexibilities to meet the diverse needs of students.** Some Australian and overseas jurisdictions have introduced separate pathways or qualifications for students with diverse needs. Some jurisdictions have implemented life-skills and modified programs for students with neurodivergence. For example, the New South Wales senior secondary system includes a pathway for students with disability, which includes varied assessment and records of achievement. Other jurisdictions have enhanced reporting on achievement of students with disability. For example, the Victorian Certificate of Education student achievement profile model. Some jurisdictions have increased flexibilities and expanded on special considerations to help students meet literacy and/or numeracy standards and other jurisdictions are reviewing flexible alternatives like Big Picture Education learning.
- **Pursuing new models of external assessment that consider the best way to test desired capabilities.** This can include VET scores, moderated using pair-wise comparison of student work samples; shorter external assessments in applied courses; oral and performance assessments in the arts. For example, New Zealand's use of external portfolio assessment in design and arts subjects; England's introduction of grading for vocational 'T-Levels' courses; and Victoria's introduction of a VET Major.
- **Improving the status of vocational pathways, to reduce the stigma around VET and make vocational education a more mainstream option.** Both Australian and overseas jurisdictions have sought to address the issue of vocational education being stigmatised and seen as a 'lesser option' than academic pathways. Jurisdictions have taken different approaches to address this issue. For example, some jurisdictions have moved to a more unified set of courses; Victoria has recently ended the formal bifurcation between academic and vocational pathways by introducing a vocational major within the Victorian Certificate of Education; and in the UK, 'T-Levels' have been introduced as a new, high-quality vocational education option.
- **Deepening linkages between vocational pathways and industry to better serve students transitioning from school to employment.** Some overseas jurisdictions have introduced strong partnerships between industry and schools to ensure content taught to students is relevant for future employment, and students are able to connect quickly with jobs and further training opportunities with employers. For example, Singapore Polytechnic (a senior secondary institution) engages employers in designing content and incorporates placements as part of study.
- **Increasing the range of information included on school completion certificates.** Some Australian and overseas jurisdictions have reformed how descriptive school completion certificates are to better support school leavers in representing their skills. For example, some jurisdictions have developed an elaborated component to the school completion certificate showing additional certified skills e.g. First Nations on-country experience. The school completion certificates can then be used to demonstrate student ability when applying for further learning or employment.
- **Increasing the range of courses that can count toward school completion certificates.** Australian jurisdictions are increasingly moving towards recognising a more diverse range of activities in school completion certificates. This allows for students to

engage in activities that align with their interests and skills and have this count towards their school completion. The senior secondary system in the Canadian province of Ontario includes a diverse range of course and program options that count towards achieving their school completion certificate. These include community involvement activities and online learning credits.

- **Embedding capabilities and competencies into the school completion certificate.** Some Australian jurisdictions are certifying complex capabilities through course objectives and assessment, rather than as a separate assessment and reporting strand. South Australia has identified 5 key capabilities and is investigating how they can be embedded into the South Australian Certificate of Education i.e. Personal enterprise, Principled action, Self-motivated learning, Quality thinking, and Collective engagement, and mapped them against national frameworks and developed them with industry and businesses.

Q6 Are there reforms that have taken place in other jurisdictions that this review should consider in a WA context? You might like to consider:

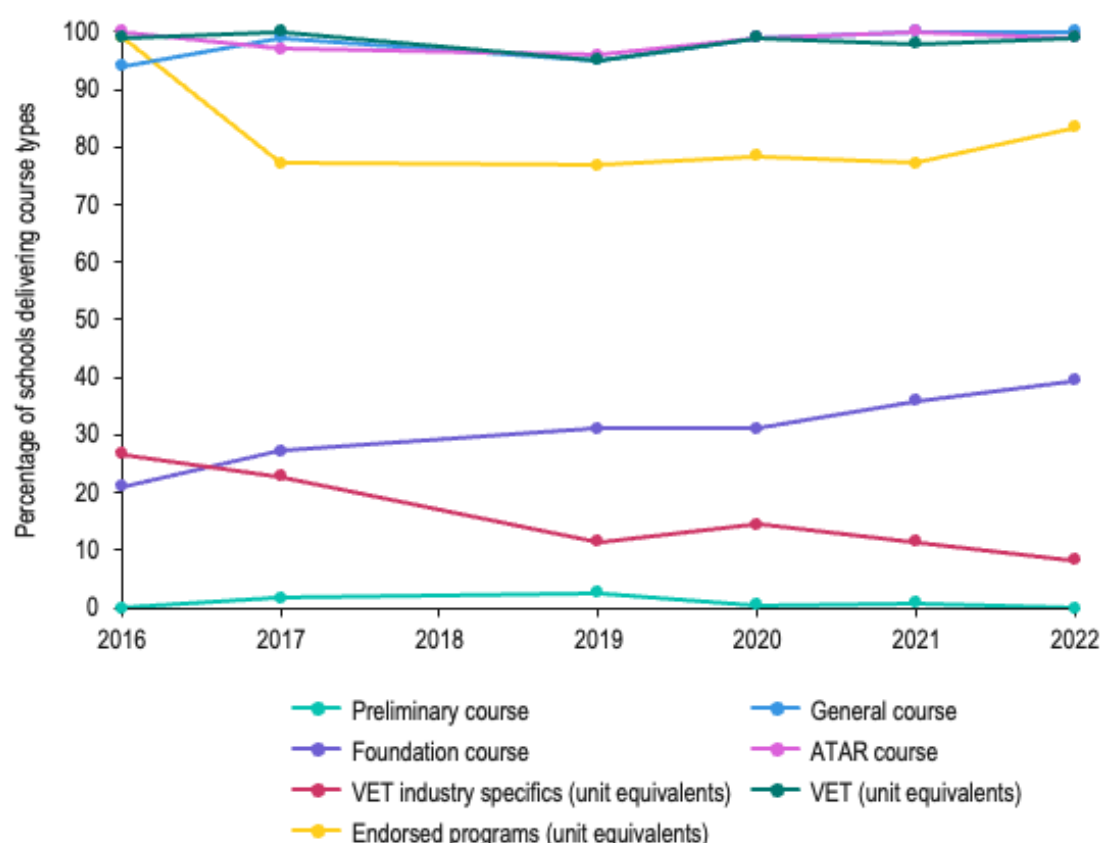
- **The balance between academic performance, vocational skills attainment and capabilities and competencies within senior secondary schools**
- **How reforms are responding to changes in the world of work**
- **The benefits and limitations of having multiple separate pathways to serve distinct student cohorts; or a single flexible, unified approach**
- **Different approaches to assessment, including different models of internal and external assessments**
- **The benefits and limitations of introducing tailored pathways / qualifications / reporting to support the needs of students with disability**
- **Long-term system sustainability (e.g. complementarity with alternative qualifications that may emerge in future).**

Decisions made by schools

What is the status quo?

Almost all schools in WA¹⁴ deliver three main course types – General, ATAR and VET. This has been largely consistent since 2016, when General and ATAR courses were introduced. Around 80% of schools deliver endorsed programs. Other course types are not as widely delivered though there has been a significant increase in the proportion of schools offering Foundation courses (up from 21% in 2016 to 39% in 2022). Preliminary courses and VET industry specific courses are not as widely delivered.

Figure 1: Course types delivered by school¹⁵



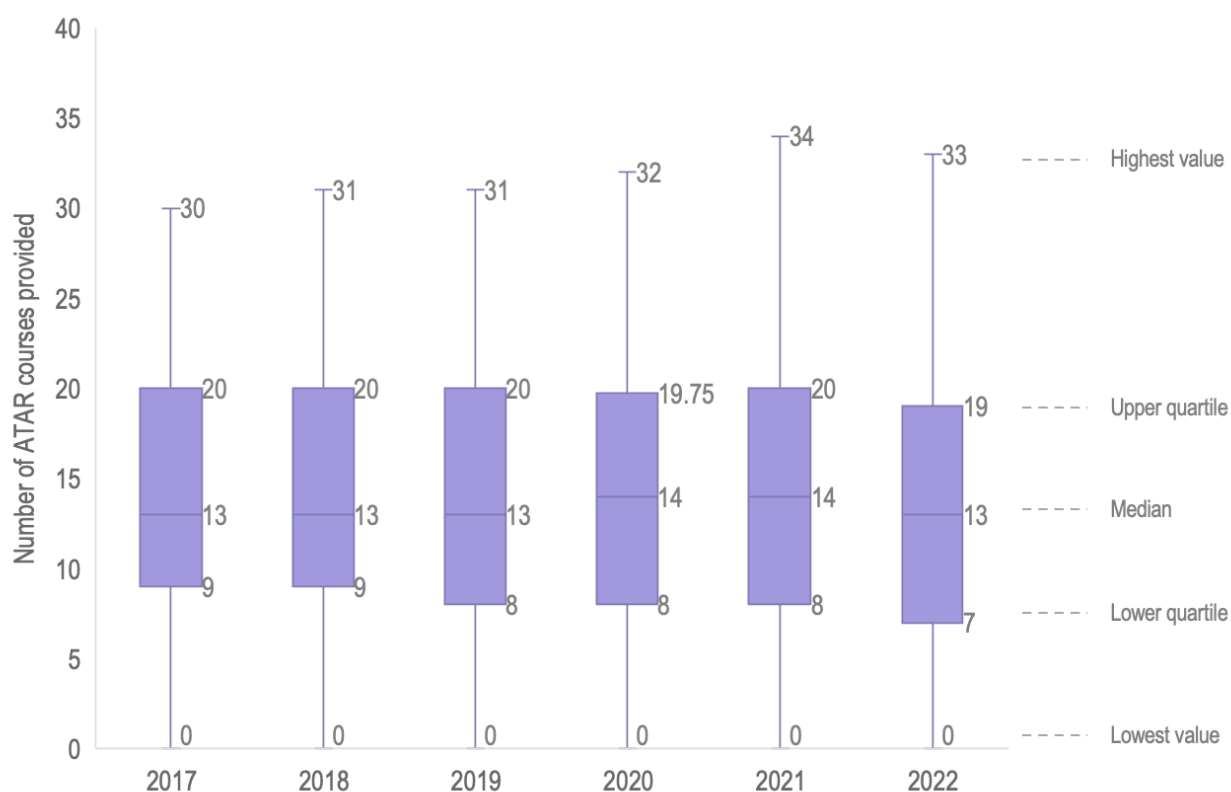
To gain insights into the breadth of courses offered by schools, we examined school ATAR course offerings.¹⁶ The number of ATAR courses schools deliver has remained broadly consistent over time, with the median WA school delivering 13 ATAR subjects. There is variation in the number of ATAR courses schools offer, with higher ICSEA schools and major city schools providing more ATAR subjects than others; and larger schools more likely to offer a broader range of ATAR courses.

¹⁴ Note: The dataset used for this analysis excludes schools with less than 20 schools enrolled. This means that small schools – which we understand are more likely to be remote or very remote schools – are under-represented in the sample.

¹⁵ Data limitation: We identified school course offerings by counting all schools that offered at least 1 course in the course type. This does not consider the volume of courses provided by each school i.e. some schools may only offer 1 ATAR course but are counted on this graph.

¹⁶ This analysis was possible because school-level data on the number of ATAR courses delivered was made available to the Expert Panel. School-level data on other course types (e.g. General courses; VET courses) was not provided.

Figure 2: Number of ATAR courses by school¹⁷



Discussion

The broad provision of the three major course types supports some diversity in offering, but the variation in how many different courses is offered suggests some limitations.

There are a range of course options delivered in most schools, including ATAR, General and VET courses, and endorsed programs. Flexible course and program options allow students to make choices that reflect their interests and post-career pathways. Having a range of courses to choose from is consistent with the objective of 'optimising student engagement' as students can complete courses they are interested in. It is also supportive of 'reflecting diversity and uniqueness' as it acknowledges that students require course levels that are appropriate for their starting point, trajectories and ambitions.

Other course types (Foundation courses, Preliminary courses and VET industry specific courses) are not as widely delivered – which may have access implications for the cohorts of learners for whom some of these offerings are intended (including students with intellectual disability or learning difficulties).

The fact that the breadth of ATAR courses differs depending on a school's ICSEA, geography and size may be inconsistent with the objective of 'reflecting diversity and uniqueness' and 'ensuring system integrity' if the result is that certain cohorts of students do not have equitable opportunities to pursue ATAR courses that align with their interests.

Many factors influence the decisions schools make on which course and program options to offer – for example, student demand, staff availability, resourcing. Anecdotally, we

¹⁷ Data limitation: ATAR was the only course type on which data on the number of courses delivered was available at a school level. For this reason, we were not able to undertake the same analysis for general subjects and VET subjects.

understand that ATAR achievement is seen as an important indicator of school success, and one that often guides parental choice about which schools children attend. Any consideration of increasing course and program options available will also need to consider the objective of 'finding achievable solutions', given the barriers schools face in delivering broader course options.

Q7 Why do schools make the decisions they do on what course, program and pathway options they offer? You might like to comment on:

- **Barriers to offering more diverse course and program offerings**
- **Availability of the enablers that schools need to offer courses (e.g. funding, teachers, facilities)**
- **Particular challenges faced by schools in low-socio-economic areas, remote areas, and with small senior secondary numbers.**

Q8 Which students are served well by the decisions that schools make? Which students are not served well? You might like to comment on:

- **The relationship between school choices and choices that parents make about which schools their children attend**
- **The appropriateness of existing course and program options for particular cohorts of students (e.g. students with intellectual disability or learning difficulty; culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students).**

Decisions made by students

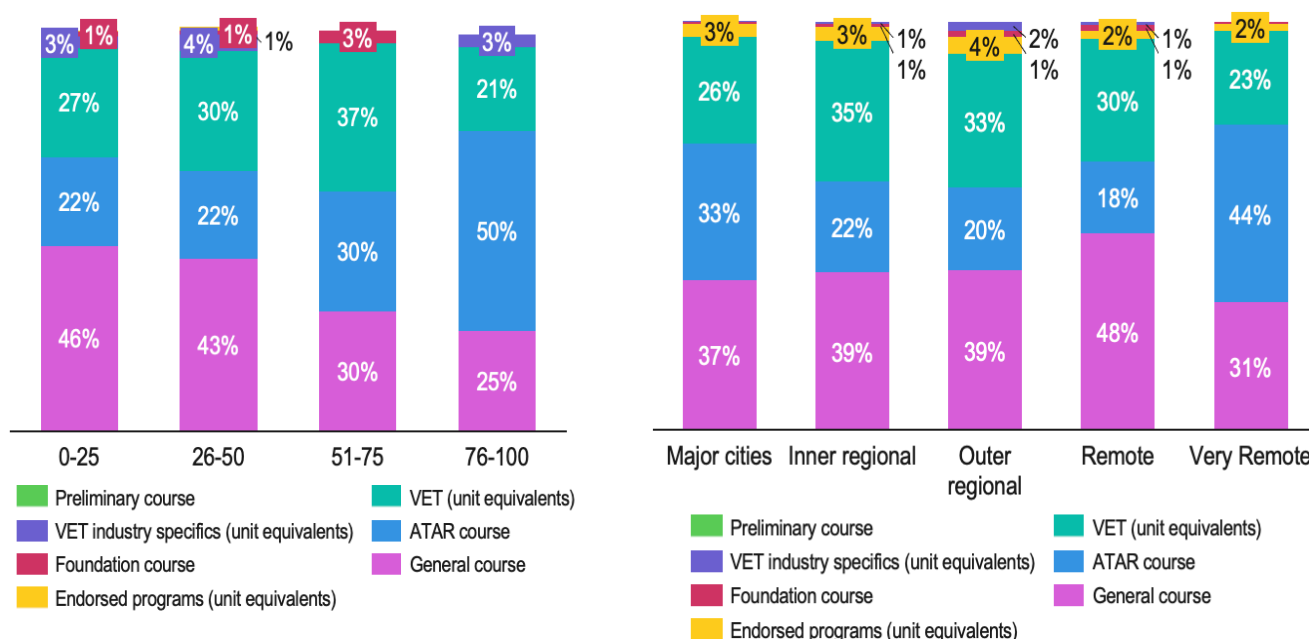
What is the status quo?

How student choice differs by school factors

To understand the choices students are making, we analysed 'total Year 12 units completed' by different course types. This analysis revealed differences in the types of courses and programs students complete based on their school's ICSEA quartile, location, and school size.

Students from the highest ICSEA-quartile schools complete a higher proportion of ATAR courses than students from other ICSEA-quartile schools. The reverse is true for General courses, with students at the lowest ICSEA quartile schools completing the most General courses. Schools in the highest ICSEA quartile also have the lowest rates of VET when compared to the lower ICSEA quartiles. Remote schools have the highest proportion of General course completion and the lowest proportion of ATAR course completion.¹⁸

Figures 3 and 4: Student uptake of course types by ICSEA quartile and remoteness

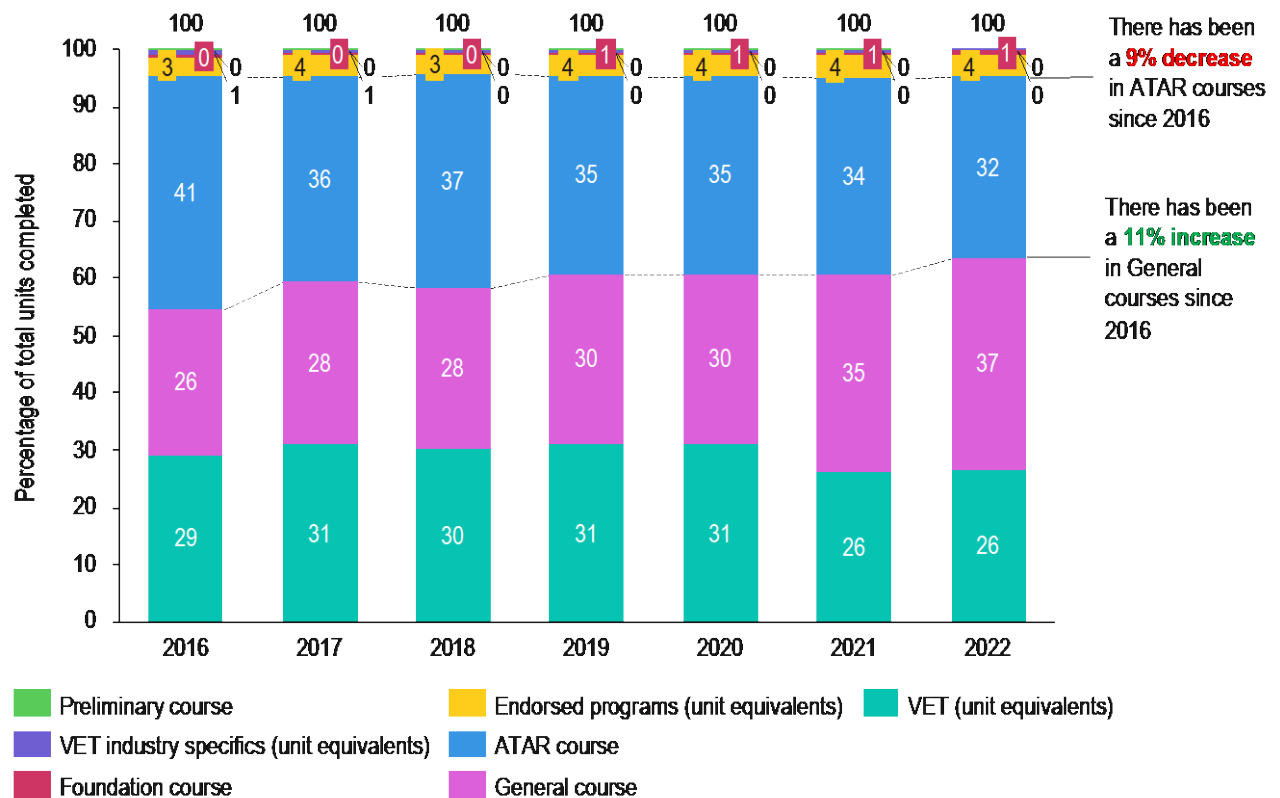


Changes to student course and program choices over time

Analysis of how the 'mix' of courses students are taking has changed over time shows that there has been an 11% increase in student completions of General courses (as a proportion of all courses) since 2016. This increase has been relative to a decline in mainly ATAR courses (with a 9% decrease since 2016) and VET courses. Further analysis shows that this move to General courses has occurred across all socioeconomic and geographic contexts – i.e. it is not a phenomenon that is isolated to a particular location or demographic group.

¹⁸ Figure 5 Student uptake of course types by remoteness. Please note that while this chart shows that 'Very remote schools' have the highest proportion of students completing ATAR courses, the dataset provided does not include schools with less than 30 students. This may make data on very remote schools less reliable.

Figure 5: Student uptake of course types over time



Discussion

The difference in the choices students make depending on their schools' ICSEA ranking, location and size may indicate that student decisions are driven by different attitudes, information and advice on course and program options, as well as the post-school pathways they can lead to.

The shift toward students across the WA system undertaking more General courses and fewer ATAR and VET courses can be seen as aligning with the objective of 'reflecting diversity and uniqueness' – given that the current system is offering students with different starting points and aspirations an alternative to ATAR or VET pathways. The fact that this shift is taking place across the school system and is not restricted to particular demographic groups also indicates that the shift is not further entrenching existing differences between demographic groups. The shift may also support 'optimising student engagement' if it encourages students to remain engaged with schooling that would not have done so otherwise.

The shift may be less consistent with the objective of 'providing effective pathways', given students are undertaking fewer ATAR and VET courses. This may limit student access to particular post-school pathways such as university and further VET study.

Q9 Why do students make the decisions that they do on courses and programs? What are the consequences of student decisions? You may wish to consider:

- The shift toward students taking more General courses, and fewer ATAR and VET courses
- Any perverse incentives that arise due to the structure of current senior secondary pathways
- How decisions are framed for students by their schools / where they are encouraged to make particular choices and why.

Q10 How could students be better supported to make decisions on senior secondary pathways? You may wish to consider:

- **Whether students and their families are empowered to make informed pathway and study course decisions**
- **The provision of career education support in schools**
- **Particular groups of students that are well / poorly served by the current system.**

Student experience

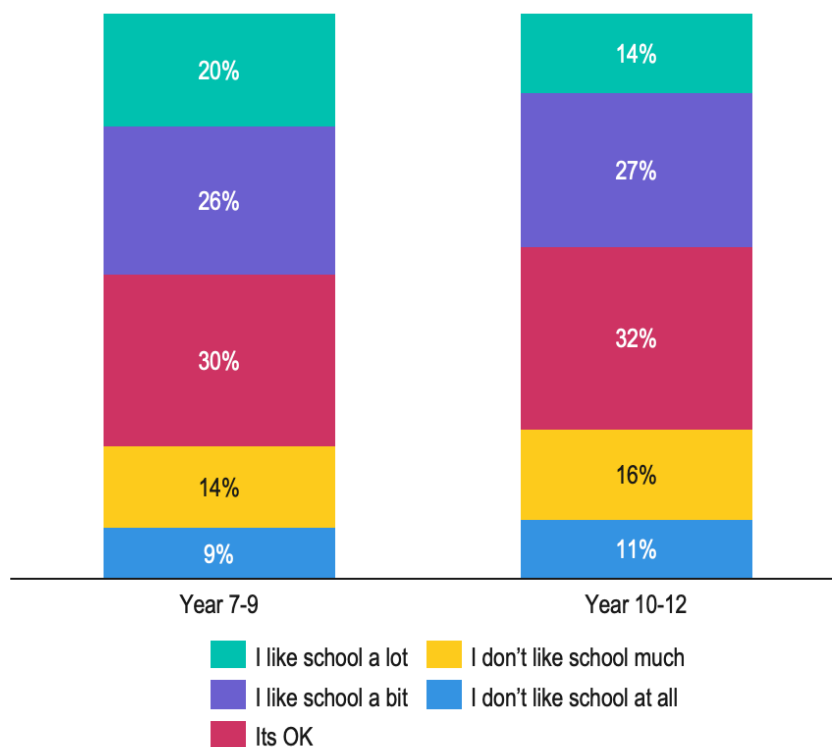
What is the status quo?

Student attitudes toward school

The Speaking Out Survey, a comprehensive survey of children and young people from all regions of WA, provides insights into the student experience of senior secondary pathways.¹⁹ The report considers student attitudes toward school, student wellbeing and whether students considered what they were learning as helpful to their future.

In general, students have either an ambivalent (32%) or positive (41%) view of school in senior secondary education. However, there is still a significant proportion of students that dislike school. Senior secondary students have more negative attitudes toward school than their junior secondary counterparts.

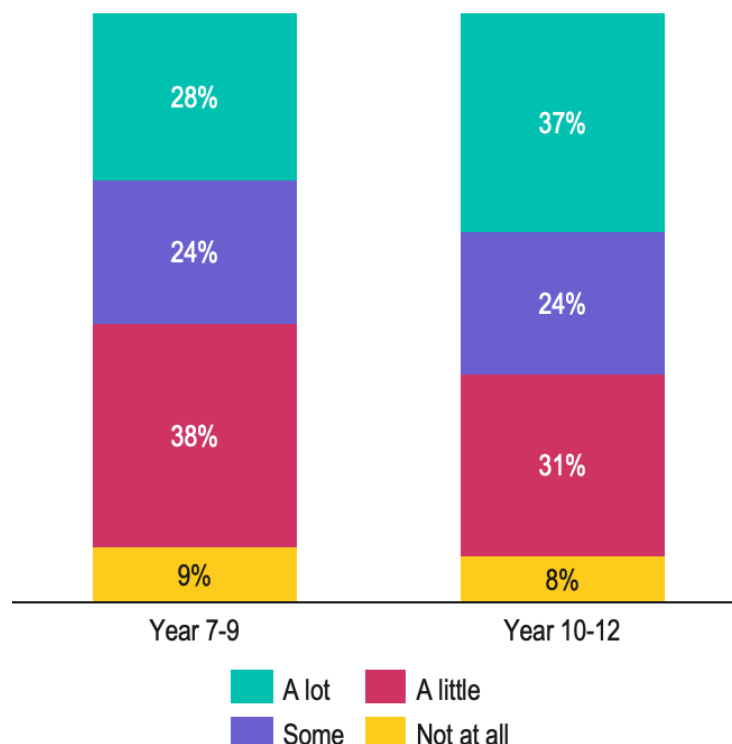
Figure 6: Student experience of school, Q: Do you like school?



Although the largest proportion of students find school 'ok', having a quarter of students dislike school is significant. Comparing these results to students in junior secondary school also provides insight into what changes when students enter senior secondary schools. The most notable change is that the number of students that 'like school a lot' drops from 20% in junior secondary to 14% in senior secondary. The proportion of students reporting that 'I don't like school much' or 'I don't like school at all' increases from 23% of Year 7-9 to 27% of Year 10-12 students.

¹⁹ Speaking out survey 2021, The Speaking Out Survey is a survey that the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People conducts on the wellbeing of children and young people in WA. The survey was conducted in 2019 and 2021. The 2021 survey had a sample of more than 16,500 children and young people from across all regions of WA.

Figure 7: Student experience of school, Q: Extent to which students feel pressured by schoolwork



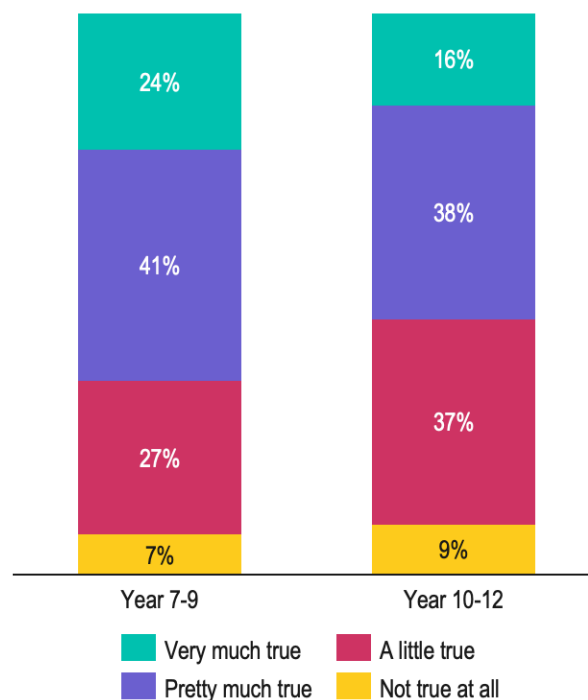
Student wellbeing

Student wellbeing amongst senior secondary students is considerably lower than their junior secondary counterparts. Only 48% of senior secondary students rate their life satisfaction between 7 and 10 compared to 58% of students in junior secondary school. Stress related to school or study were the most frequently reported sources of stress for students in Year 9 to 12 with 88.7% of students saying they were affected by this. This figure is also higher for students in senior secondary school compared to junior secondary. A survey question considering the 'extent to which students feel pressured by schoolwork' found that 37% of senior secondary students found they felt 'a lot' of pressure compared to only 27% for students in junior secondary school.

Learning as helpful for student future

Students in senior secondary have broad confidence that what they are learning at school will help them in the future. The survey question 'at my school, I am learning knowledge and skills that will help me in the future' found 38% of students believed this was 'pretty much true' and 16% 'very much true'. However, over a third of students (37%) stated this was 'a little true'. This shows that there is a large proportion of students that do not believe their learning will significantly support their future. Students from senior secondary school also have less belief in the usefulness of their learning for their future than junior secondary students. A large proportion of junior secondary students (65%) answered 'pretty much true' (41%) or 'very much true' (24%) to the question of whether learning and knowledge would help them in the future. This is compared to only 54% of senior secondary students. There is also a significant jump in students that only find the statement 'a little true' with 37% of senior secondary students choosing this option compared to 27% of junior secondary students.

Figure 8: Student experience of school, Q: Extent to which students agree that ‘At my school, I am learning knowledge and skills that will help me in the future’



Discussion

Senior secondary students broadly like school and believe that the content they are learning will help them in the future – though this number is lower among senior secondary students than their junior secondary counterparts. Opportunities to strengthen course and program offerings to demonstrate how content relates to the knowledge and skills they will require in the future could support the objective of ‘providing effective pathways’ and ‘optimising student engagement’ – especially if such changes result in increased attendance and engagement.

A large proportion of students feel pressured by schoolwork to a large extent and almost all face school related stress. They also experience stress through external stressors relating to their personal circumstances, part-time work or other non-school related commitments. Comparing junior secondary students to senior secondary students highlights increased stress and reduced wellbeing. This may be related to more formalised assessments in senior secondary, especially for students undertaking formal examinations. The current system does offer some flexibility for students with regard to assessment options (for example, students feeling high levels of exam anxiety in relation to exams can opt for non-ATAR pathways), which is consistent with the current emphasis on wellbeing. It may also be consistent with the objective of ‘optimising student engagement’ if the ability to finish Year 12 without undertaking exams results in students remaining in school who would not have done so otherwise. However, some education stakeholders argue that formal examinations remain important (they are seen as consistent with objectives around ‘ensuring system integrity’ and ‘promoting learning and relevance’).

Q11 Are there opportunities to strengthen student engagement, and if so, how can this be done? You may wish to consider:

- Changes to the curriculum
- Increased opportunities for hands-on learning, applied learning and demonstrated relevance, including expanding opportunities for students to show additional certified skills (e.g. recognition of First Nations on-country experience; other certifiable awards and certificates)
- Considerations and flexibilities for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to support their attainment.

Q12 Are there opportunities to improve student wellbeing as they progress through senior secondary pathways? You may wish to consider:

- Current models of assessment and potential alternatives.

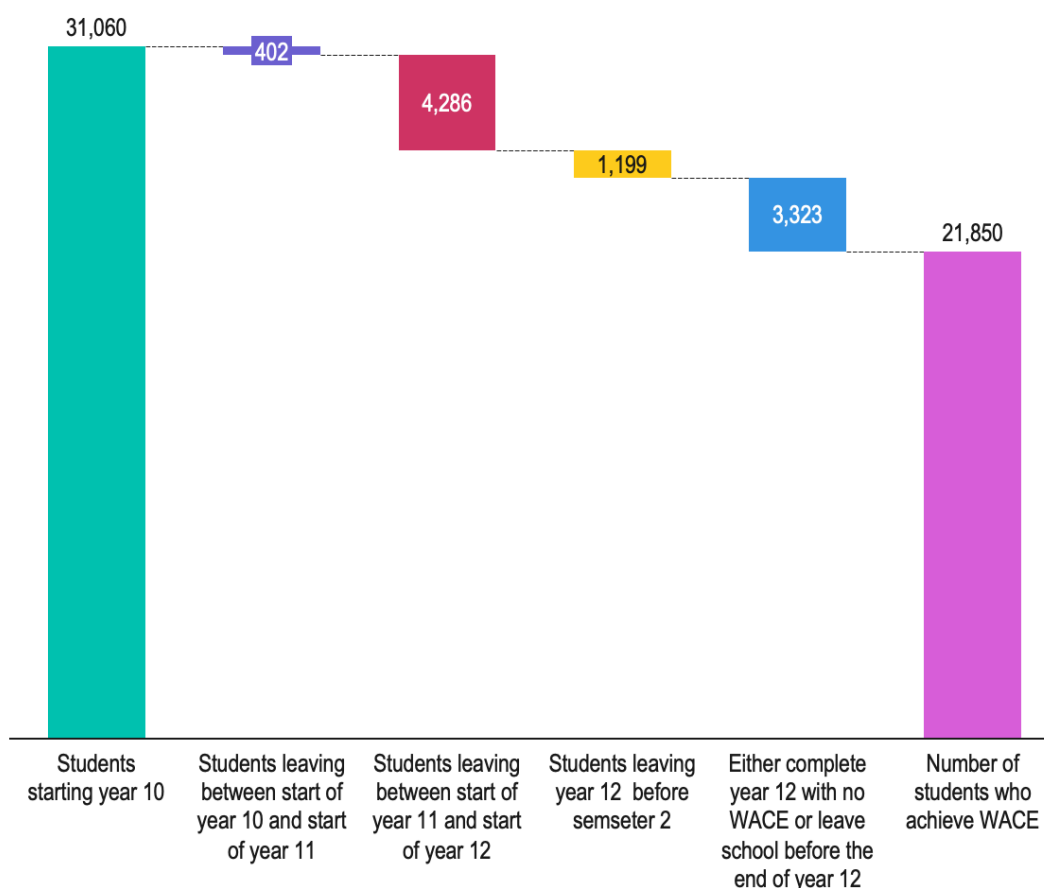
Student outcomes

What is the status quo?

Overall senior secondary retention and outcomes

Based on analysis of the cohort of WA students that commenced Year 10 in 2020, around two thirds of students achieved a WACE. Of those that did not, the largest cohort left school between the start of Year 11 and start of Year 12.

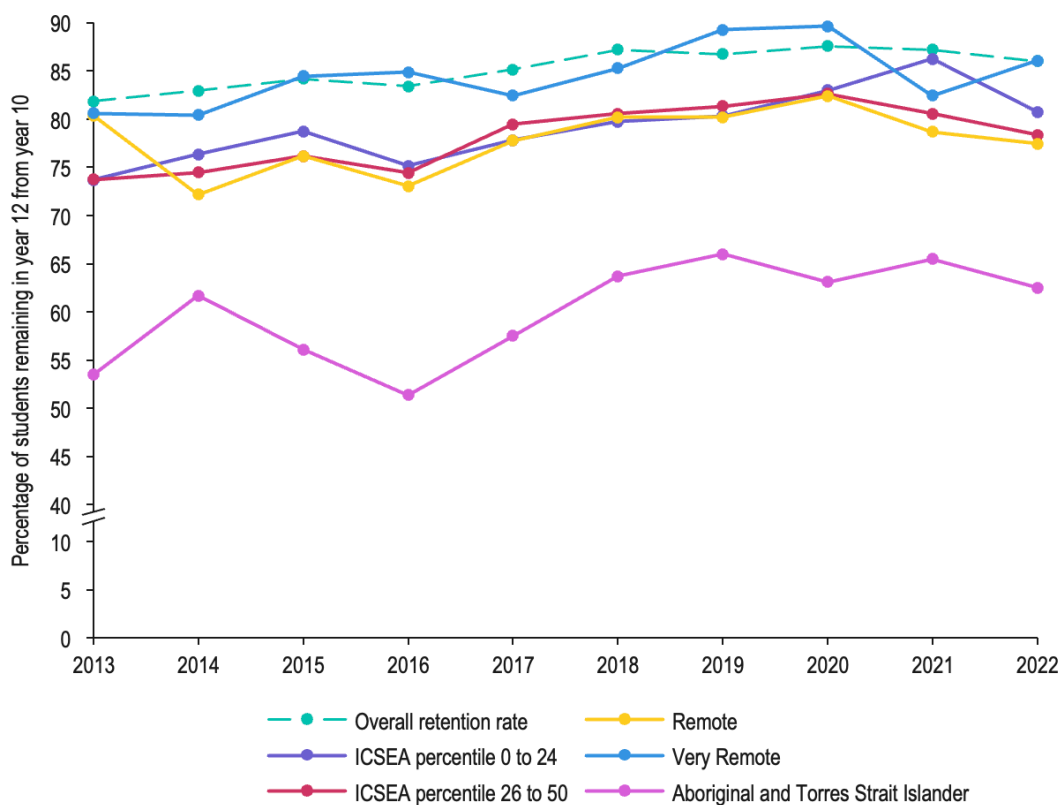
Figure 9: Student retention from Years 10 to 12



Apparent retention²⁰ of students has remained largely stable over time, although there are significantly lower retention rates for certain cohorts. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Year 12 retention is significantly lower than for the broader population (at 62.5% in 2022). Students in the two lowest ICSEA quartiles have lower retention rates than the upper quartiles. Remote students also have lower-than-average retention rates.

²⁰ Data limitation: The 'apparent retention rate' is a measure that shows what proportion of the Year 10 population continued on to Year 12. Because it is a count of the number of Year 10 students that continue on to Year 12, apparent retention rate does not measure actual retention (i.e. it is a measure of cohort size and does not track retention of individual students).

Figure 10: Apparent retention rates over time

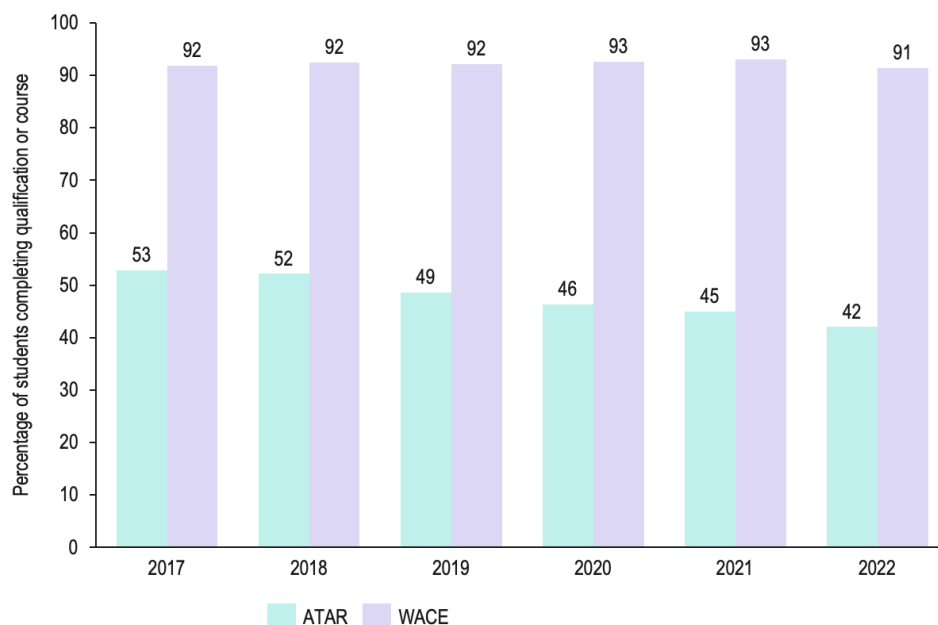


Notice of arrangements data reveals that for students that leave before the end of Year 12, 31% enter a traineeship or apprenticeship. This is closely followed by students completing a full-time TAFEWA course (28%) or entering full time employment (21%). While notice of arrangements data does not cover all students leaving school early, this suggests that students that do not complete Year 12 are largely entering VET pathways.

Number of students achieving WACE and ATAR

The proportion of students achieving the WACE has remained largely steady over time, but the proportion achieving the ATAR has dropped 11% from 2017 to 2022 – meaning that less than half of the WA Year 12 population graduates with an ATAR. This decline has been relatively consistent over time.

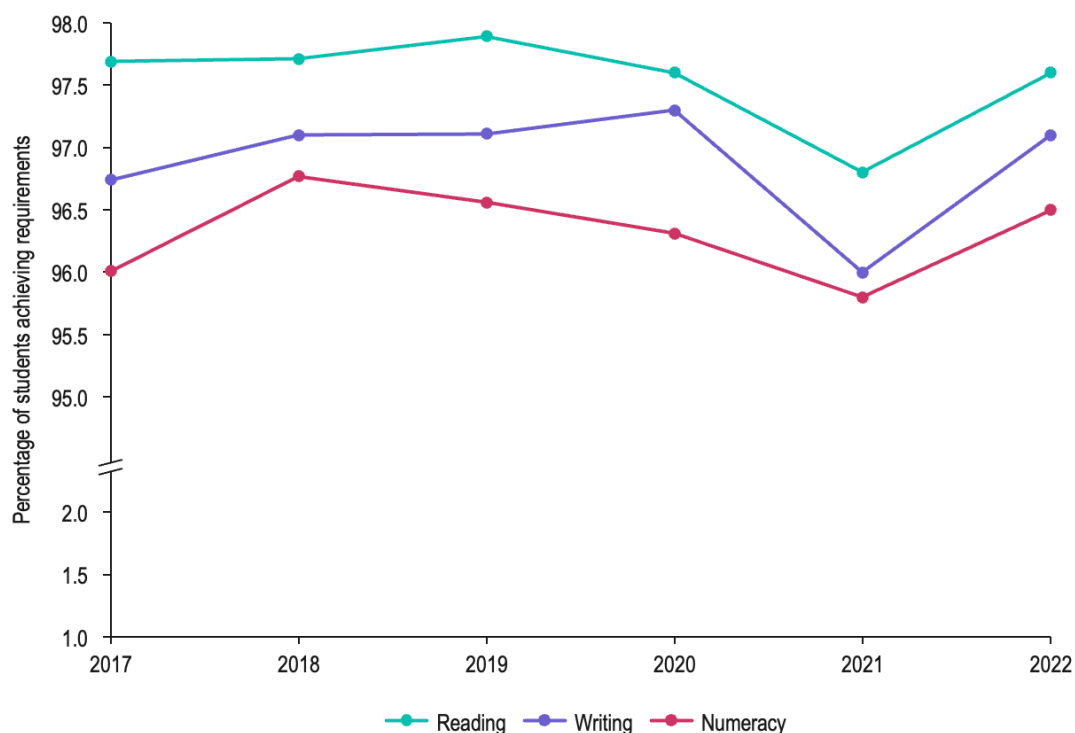
Figure 11: WACE and ATAR achievement over time



Literacy and numeracy requirements

Students must satisfy literacy and numeracy requirements to achieve the WACE. Literacy and numeracy achievement have remained consistent over time, with a high achievement rate for reading, writing and numeracy. Reading has the highest achievement rates followed by writing and then numeracy. While most students achieve the literacy and numeracy requirements at a population level (in 2022, 94.2% achieved the standards by the end of Year 12), we understand anecdotally that failure rates are much higher for particular cohorts – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, and CALD students. The Expert Panel did not have access to data for these groups specifically.

Figure 12: Achievement of literacy and numeracy requirements

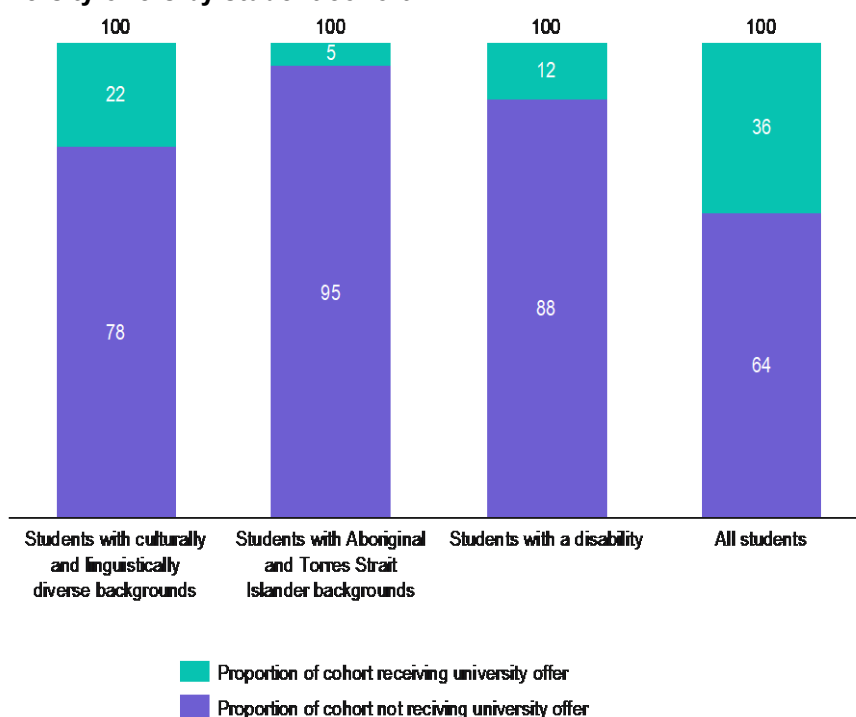


Post-school destinations

Complete data on post-school destinations for WA students is not available. According to the WA government's Post-school Destinations Survey of Students that complete Year 12, university is consistently the most popular post-school destination with an average of 37.5% of students going to university from 2016 to 2022 – but this dataset has major limitations, as it only measures post-school destinations for an incomplete sample of government school students (with the sample size averaging 73% over 2016 to 2022).²¹

According to TISC data, across the total Year 12 population, 36% of students receive a university offer. But our analysis indicates that this proportion decreases for particular cohorts, with students from CALD backgrounds and students with disability less likely to receive an offer. Only 5% of students with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds receive a university offer.

Figure 13: University offers by student cohort²²



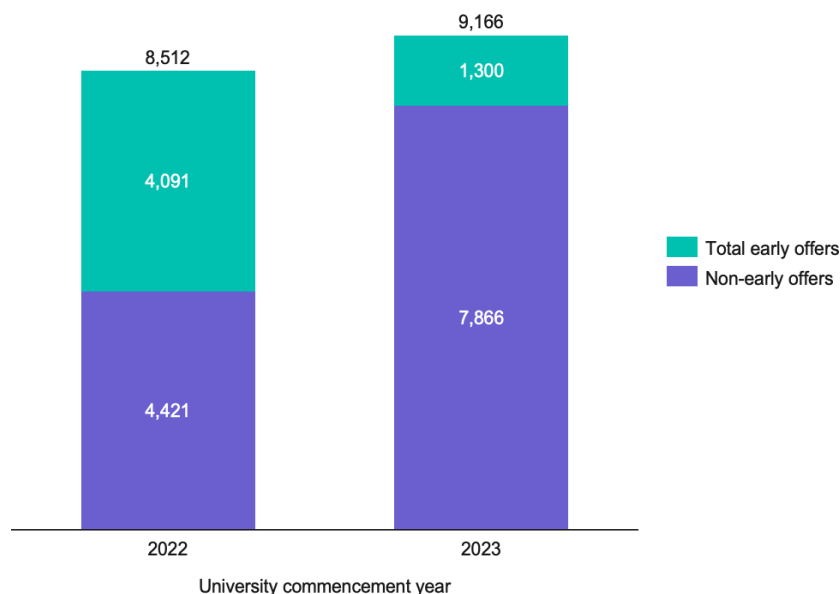
In recent years, early offers to university have gained prominence – especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. TISC provided data on early offers for the 2022 and 2023 university commencement years.²³ This data showed that early offers were significantly higher for the 2022 university commencement year than for 2023. Though the lack of trend data makes it hard to draw conclusions, this may indicate that there has been a correction from the trend toward high levels of early offers seen around Australia following COVID-19.

²¹ WA Post-School Destinations Survey, 2016-2022 (via Productivity Commission *Report on Government Services*). This dataset has major limitations: It only covers government school students and the sample size has averaged only 73% of government school students over the years 2016-2022.

²² Data limitation: Because data on the actual size of these cohorts was not available, the population sizes of these cohorts were calculated based on estimates from the *Speaking Out Survey*, which were calculated using a different methodology to the TISC data. Because of this, these calculations should be considered indicative, rather than precise.

²³ Data for earlier admission years was not available.

Figure 14: Early offers to university²⁴



Discussion

Analysis of data on student outcomes shows that there may be certain cohorts of students that the current senior secondary pathways are not serving as well as they could. Cohorts that we understand may merit further attention include students that depart school before the end of Year 12; students that finish school but do not achieve a WACE; and students that are neither working nor studying following the final year of school. To strengthen the ability of the system to deliver on the objective of 'reflecting diversity and uniqueness', there may also be a need to consider how to support particular demographic groups to achieve improved school and post-school outcomes (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; CALD students; students with disability; students from low SES and remote areas).

Given the requirement to satisfy the literacy and numeracy standard in order to achieve a WACE is understood to disproportionately impact particular cohorts (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; CALD students; students with disability), it may be inconsistent with the objective of 'reflecting diversity and uniqueness'. If this requirement is also creating a barrier for students to undertake further VET study, it may also be inconsistent with the objective of 'providing effective pathways'. The requirement to satisfy the literacy and numeracy requirement may be more consistent with the objective of 'ensuring system integrity'.

The emergence of early offers and alternative pathways to university has been a significant feature of the system in recent years. Students have alternatives to the traditional ATAR pathway to apply for universities, which allows for a flexible system to meet student needs if they are unable or prefer not to sit exams. This is consistent with 'providing effective pathways', given it creates opportunities for students to transition to one of the major post-school options. It is also consistent with 'optimising student engagement' as it ensures students are not put off finishing school if they do not wish to sit exams. It may be less consistent with the objectives of 'ensuring system integrity' if the opportunities to take up non-traditional pathways are not equitably distributed across the student population; and

²⁴ Data limitation: There were only two years of available data on early entry to university. This makes it difficult to reliably draw trends over time or know if this will be a significant feature in future.

'promoting learning and relevance' if students that are accessing alternative pathways have reduced incentives to maximise their learning during Year 12.

There may be opportunities to adapt school leaving certificates to better 'provide effective pathways' and 'reflect diversity and uniqueness'. While the WASSA does include some relevant information on student achievements beyond school marks, there may be opportunities to revisit what is included to provide a more holistic picture of what students have learned, and individual strengths and skills. A more comprehensive school leaver certificate would likely be of particular benefit to students that intend to directly enter employment following school. There may also be merit in considering whether records of learning could be provided to students that leave school before the end of Year 12, to aid post-school transitions for this cohort.

Q13 How could outcomes be strengthened for students that leave school early?

Q14 How could outcomes be strengthened for students at the end of school? You may wish to consider:

- **ATAR, including its role as a pathway and the way it is calculated**
- **WACE, including the potential to build in increased flexibility**
- **The role of literacy and numeracy assessments (e.g. whether they should be a mandatory requirement of WACE achievement; the possibility of strengthening arrangements for exemptions and special consideration)**
- **Equity considerations**
- **Whether school leaving certificates could be used to more effectively communicate and recognise skills that are suited to work, employment and university access and success.**

Q15 How could outcomes be strengthened for diverse cohorts?

Appendix A: Acronyms and abbreviations list

Acronym or abbreviation	Meaning
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse students
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
OLNA	Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment
PPSS	Pathways to Post-School Success
TEE	Tertiary Entrance Exam
TISC	Tertiary Institutions Service Centre
WA	Western Australia
WACE	Western Australian Certificate of Education
WASSA	Western Australian Statement of Student Achievement

Appendix B: References list

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