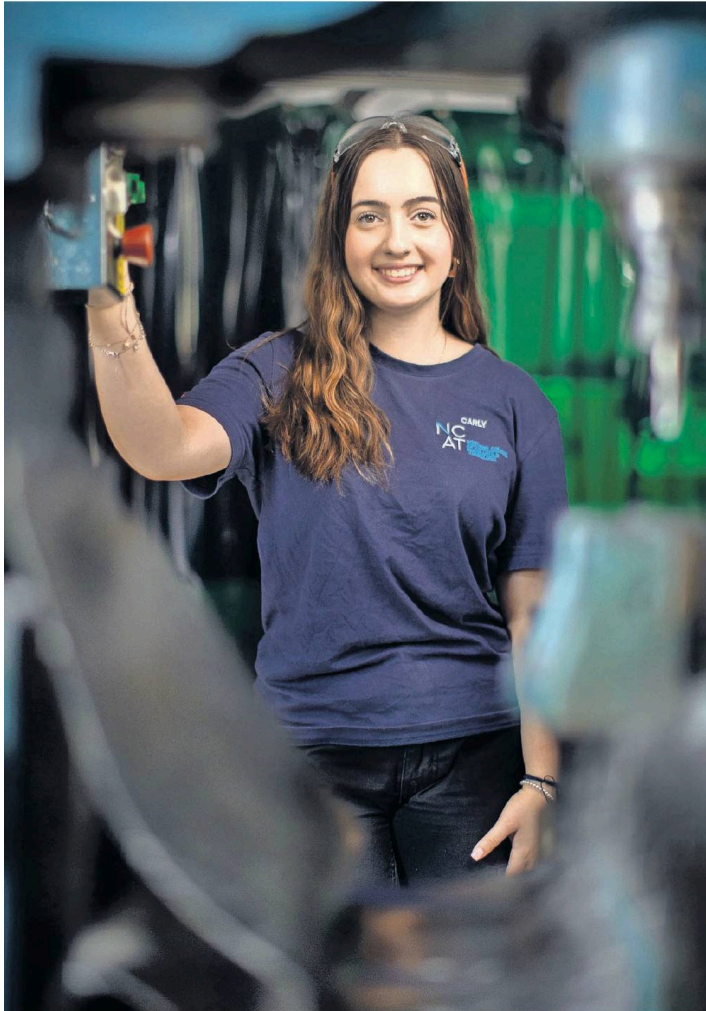


Test-shy students thrive by breaking ranks

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Carly Brown and Yusef Shakeri chose the vocational stream of VCE because it suited their learning styles. Photos: Simon Schluter

Students are opting out of exams in record numbers as institutions increasingly offer alternatives to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank to cater to young people's different interests.

Universities are expanding the selection procedures to attract students with the right skills, as interest in the ATAR declines – a trend experts predict will continue.

About 71 per cent of students who started year 12 in Victoria in 2023 got an ATAR, down from more than 81 per cent 10 years ago, Department of Education enrolment data shows.

Of the 2023 cohort, 10 per cent completed the VCE Vocational Major, an applied learning program that last year replaced the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

Northern College of the Arts and Technology (NCAT) graduate Yusef Shakeri used the VCE Vocational Major to secure a place in an RMIT diploma course, which he has since deferred after landing his dream job as a multimedia technician.

Shakeri, 18, began looking for an alternative to the ATAR after “barely passing” practice exams in year 10 at Coburg High School and struggling to find subjects that interested him for VCE.

After being encouraged to pursue a career aligned with his interests, Shakeri said he went from hating school to looking forward to it.

He said there was still a perception that graduates will fall behind without an ATAR, but he found the opposite was true.

“I reckon I got out of year 12 with more qualifications and certificates than all my other friends who have done VCE,” he said.

In addition to the International Baccalaureate diploma program, which more than 2600 Australian students completed last year, the internationally recognised school certificate, Big Picture Learning, is being offered at more and more schools.

Nationwide, more than 45 schools offer the alternative stream, which gives students flexibility to pursue personal interests and often includes work experience, mentorship and learning in small groups.

In 2023, more than 100 students used a Big Picture Learning end-of-school assessment, recently developed by the University of Melbourne, to enter one of the 17 Australian universities accepting the credential for admission.

While the uptake of Big Picture Learning in Victoria has been slow, the University of Melbourne has built on the concept through the development of a “learner profile” and is partnering with 23 schools to trial the concept, including Scotch College and Carey Baptist Grammar School.

Proposed as an alternative to the ATAR, the learner profile encapsulates students’ achievements from age 15 to when they finish school and often includes achievement in a vocational subject, community service or other out-of-school activities.

Assessment Research Centre director Sandra Milligan said her team at Melbourne University was working with Victorian education authorities to get learner profiles used for tertiary education selection.

Milligan said the aim was for a “post-ATAR method of university selection” that could be used by all universities and schools.

“That’s a huge undertaking... ambitious, but we’ve got all the players around the table,” she said.

The researchers found about 40 per cent of Australian students finish school without obtaining an ATAR.

As its popularity declines, Milligan said universities were increasingly asking students to submit portfolios for admission assessment, which required a huge amount of work and were often outsourced to businesses for a cost, mimicking the American system.

She said the VCE was not fostering in students the skills employers and universities value, including critical and creative thinking, and entrepreneurship.

“Most 16- and 17-year-olds ... are consumers of set content delivered in predetermined packages and they’re assessed on the degree to which they can master that set content,” she

said. "ChatGPT does exams better than most people, so we don't want to prepare them to become second-rate computers, we want to prepare them for the skills and abilities that they need for the modern era. And we want to replace the ATAR or supplement it with something that is fair, transparent, equitable, and goes to what you need to know these days, not just pass an exam."

After she sits just one English exam later this month, year 12 student Carly Brown hopes to start an electrical apprenticeship next year. Finishing school with a VCE Vocational Major, Brown, a school captain and recipient of the 2024 Vocational Student of the Year Award, wants to become an ambassador for women in trades.

Brown said she decided on the career path after sampling trades in year 10 at NCAT after moving from an all-girls school.

She said getting "test stressed" had prevented her doing well at her previous school, which didn't cater to her interests.

Brown said NCAT gave her the chance to do well.

"If you had told year-eight me this, I would not have believed you," she said. "I'm very proud of myself."