Submission in response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

"Matching for Success" Working Group

Executive summary and recommendations

In the submission, we outline how the use of learner profiles could greatly support the government's aspiration in achieving increased and wider participation in tertiary education as outlined in the interim Accord report. There are other benefits of capability assessment mechanisms, already in use within some schools, which the Review should consider, as these have great potential to add value in the transition to tertiary study by increasing access from equity cohorts, supporting student retention through better matching to courses, and promoting recognition of student capabilities more broadly.

The Accord final report should:

- support the development of innovative equitable mechanisms by which higher education admissions will support higher rates of participation;
- affirm the value of capability assessments as a feature of national skills passports and as an enabler of better matching of applicants to tertiary courses; and
- highlight the supports required, including appropriate matching to courses, to ensure that all students are able to succeed in their studies.

The "Matching for Success" Working Group

The authors of this submission named below are each working on a range of initiatives addressing various issues associated with the tertiary-secondary interface. They have come together recently as a group of assessment researchers, change-makers, universities, and tertiary admissions centres to explore how to develop different, more equitable and effective approaches to tertiary selection. The joint work has been provisionally titled the "Matching for Success" project.

The joint work arises from the emergence in Australia of a new approach to recognition and credentialing of learning at senior secondary level. Learner profiles based on robust assessment of a range of general learning competencies are currently being produced by many schools and some systems.[1]

A key premise underpinning the project is that selection and recruitment practices based on learner profiles might be used at scale to enrich the information base used by learners to inform their applications, and also by tertiary institutions in recruitment and selection processes. It is likely that a more holistic, robust and comparable information base that describes a wider range of student aptitudes and interests through learner profiles can improve selection processes, for both learners and their advisers, and tertiary institutions.

This is likely to have immediate benefit for students from under-represented groups for entry into tertiary education pathways, a key area identified in the interim Accord report, but is also likely to assist all students and institutions to generate a better match of candidate with course, to ensure student success and increase retention.

The information in learner profiles might usefully complement or even in some cases replace existing methods such as ranking based on the ATAR, or non-comparable methods such as Principals' recommendations or interviews. Learner profiles can be produced by schools using a common framework, have a universal currency, improve transparency for learners and improve the efficacy of selection decisions.

A key focus of this group's work is to explore the feasibility of this approach, with a focus on enabling improved success in tertiary study learners from First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, disability, and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. It is our belief that the use of robust and trusted learner profiles will be of great benefit in meaningfully and fairly increasing participation to the levels proposed in the interim report.

This submission reflects the views of individual and the working group on this project and is not submitted on behalf of members' employers or affiliated organisations, nor does it represent the views of the affiliated organisations.

The basis: recognition of complex competencies in secondary education

There has been global recognition of the need to broaden measures of success within schools beyond traditional assessment and recognition systems. In addition to literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge, young people also need broader social skills of communication, collaboration and ethical behaviour and the ability to perform in an intercultural environment. Personal skills, such as persistence and the capacity to use feedback and analytical skills, such as computational thinking, creativity and criticality, are

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[1] The SACE Board of SA is currently piloting the use of robust, comparable learner profiles of attainments of SACE learners in a range of general learning capabilities. It is proposed that the learner profiles will be included in the SACE; Big Picture Schools now have 33 schools that are producing a credential based on learner profiles; Schools that are part of the New Metrics Project of Melbourne Assessment are also generating warranted profiles. Each of these initiatives uses a common framework to generate robust assessment and provide trusted representation of learner capabilities.

also paramount. Entrepreneurial and enterprise skills are also important for living, learning and working in the digital era.

There is intrinsic value in recognising these capabilities in secondary schooling. Schools and programmes, including some associated with this project, are already implementing or exploring this, because this recognition enables assessment to play a formative role, equipping young people with a fuller picture of themselves. Furthermore, this information is also of practical utility to young people in enabling them to demonstrate particular skills, capabilities, or competencies when applying for tertiary study or seeking employment opportunities.

There are 70 schools from across Australia who are, in association with Melbourne Assessment, generating learner profiles for some of their students in 2023 which can be used to aid exploration of this issue.

Learner profiles

A "learner profile" graphically represents students' capabilities, typically focusing on a set of capabilities identified by the jurisdiction or community. Learner profiles produced by different groups can take a range of forms — including flowers, fans, and spirals. Despite these differences, they are based on a common underpinning competencies framework and set of standards which are used by schools to develop and assess student capability across multiple categories of capability. They do not produce just a single number provided at the end of secondary schooling.

The learner profile provides useful information to the student about their capability profile, but also provides the opportunity for the higher education system to access more holistic information about prospective students than the ATAR currently provides.

The learner profile discussion in the industry is generally led in the school sector, focused on generating capability information through secondary education and assessment. The Accord has the opportunity to drive positive change by emphasising the role that broader recognition can play in access to a reimagined Australian tertiary education system.

Linking broader recognition to the tertiary system

Current admissions tools have not necessarily kept pace with the shift towards universal access to tertiary education. The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) provides a fair and robust mechanism of comparing academic achievement across the country, vital for competitive courses making selection decisions on academic achievement. But the ATAR is not necessarily the best indicator of capacity for success for every student or every course, especially for these with relatively low ATARs. The ATAR also provides no information factors such as interest, motivation, or inherent capability required for a course. Further, the extensive range of alternative source of information used by institutions to supplement or act in place of the ATAR are burgeoning, but are not transparent to learner, are not universal and their efficacy and fairness is not always apparent.

A pilot project in South Australia is already providing capability information for some SACE students to tertiary institutions. Some universities in other jurisdictions have made arrangements to admit students on the basis of a learner profile credential.

In the same way that the 'prestige' of the ATAR has partly arisen from its use for admission to tertiary courses, formally embedding the use of learner profiles in admission processes sends a positive normative message about the value of recognising broader capabilities.

The Review supports the idea of a national skills passport including general capabilities in the interim report. More detail should be included in the final report as to the value of measuring student capabilities in a robust and comparable manner, and to explore how this can be used to improve access and admissions for higher education.

Knowledge of and discussion about students' capability profiles can also play a role in helping students understand and navigate pathways (section 2.2.3 of the interim report). A matching process can facilitate personalised transition supports for students and enhance the secondary-tertiary education interface.

The universal learning entitlement increases the importance of matching mechanisms

With the Review setting ambitious targets for participation and establishing a universal learning entitlement, admissions mechanisms which address student capability and holistic suitability for courses become vital in ensuring that the increased number of participants in the tertiary system are set up for success.

Broader access to tertiary courses increases the urgent need for more nuanced and flexible admissions mechanisms. The capability information provided by learner profiles enables a shift from ranking students via a single number to a system where students themselves, as well as tertiary courses, can consider their broader capabilities in order to enable a better match for students to the courses in which they are most likely to succeed and excel.

This matching is particularly important in addressing retention. Students who are able to recognise and use their broader capabilities in learning are more likely to stay engaged in their studies and successfully complete their course. Suitable matching therefore also supports efficient use of both students' and public funds.

A collaborative exercise

The working group members are currently engaged in a collaborative exploratory exercise to establish whether learner profile data collected through Melbourne Assessment can provide value in the tertiary selection process. This work aims to establish whether the information available through new success metrics can not only add value in the selection process, but whether and how this can be achievable at scale to enable whole-of-system change. We welcome any engagement from the Review Panel and are happy to provide further detail about this work.

"Matching for Success" Working Group

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