

# Hiring a tutor may have short-term gains but long-term losses

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Significant numbers of secondary school students receive additional assistance from private tutors. This requires a measure of time, commitment and sometimes a substantial financial investment. So does receiving external tuition make a difference to the academic outcomes for students?

## The pros and cons of hiring a tutor

On the one hand, external tuition has the potential to identify and correct areas of learning a student might be struggling with. A tutor can tailor learning to the needs of one student rather than the collective needs of an entire classroom.

Tuition sessions can be targeted and intensive. This gives [students](#) who struggle the chance to master content, and those who want to perform better, a stronger chance of achieving their goals.

Research demonstrates that individual tuition is a highly effective instructional technique. The [well-documented research](#) of eminent educational psychologist Dr Benjamin Bloom acknowledges the significant gains of individualised instruction. It shows personal tutoring can powerfully affect student learning and motivation.

Dispensed by the right person, tutoring can be beneficial on multiple levels. However, individual tuition sessions are often arranged on a weekly or fortnightly basis, which reduces the immediacy of the interaction and consequently diminishes the impact of prompt, constructive feedback.

Tutors may be poorly qualified, thus compromising content knowledge, and placing the student at risk rather than in a strengthened position. Dependence on a tutor can also be a disadvantage, as students do less and less for themselves. They may leave even the simple tasks of critical thinking, problem solving and brainstorming to the tutor.

The long-term repercussions of such dependence may hamper success in the post-school years.

## **So how does a student or parent know when to get a tutor?**

A student who is performing poorly in a particular subject should seek help first from their classroom teacher. Nothing beats the trained, directed instruction of their teacher, who is likely to be familiar with their past and present competencies, the curricular requirements and other impacting factors.

If such instruction cannot be obtained, then the student may seek outside help. However, the tuition session should replicate what goes on in the classroom, with the student being skilled, empowered and learning independently. If there is a growing dependency on the tutor, to the point where the completion of a task is delayed until the meeting with a tutor, then it may be time to re-evaluate.

Both parents and students need to understand that tuition may indeed help immediate [academic outcomes](#), but at what cost? If the session renders a lazy, reliant student, who is in constant need of support, then it may be time to question whether the tuition sessions are equipping or enervating.

Suitably qualified tutors may be a useful resource if there is a unique concern such as a lack of foundational knowledge, undisciplined study methods, or if the student has missed lesson time at school. In such cases, the assistance of a tutor may be invaluable, offering vital one-on-one assistance that could make a critical difference.

The tutor may be used to "bridge the gap", but the onus stays on the student to take an active role in mastering the content and skills required for success. The tutor's role should be one of assessment, monitoring and assistance, not to take over and perfect.

Furthermore, contemporary teachers are often time-strapped, catering regularly to the needs of a classroom, and thus missing the nuances of need experienced by individual students. Receiving individualised assistance could make the world of difference to some students, if they need personal care in order to help them reach the finish line.

With this in mind, for many students who engage the help of a tutor, the all-important ATAR is their ultimate goal. The ATAR is the currency they will use to help them "buy" into their preferred university courses. The use of a tutor may help with achieving that competitive score, and could secure the "right" course.

However, alongside this, individual students should hold themselves to personal high standards, as tertiary study requires ongoing learning, independent research skills and insightful problem solving. While the tutor may help with the short-term goal of achieving the high ATAR, the question should still be posed: are they improving overall study skills and knowledge management? Finally, for some students, the extra work imposed by a tutor may add to the pressure and anxiety of an already high-stress year at school.

This brings us back to our initial question – does enlisting the help of a tutor work with improving outcomes? The answer is dependent on the instrument one uses to measure success. If success is determined by the acquisition of short-term gains, such as a better ATAR, then external tuition may pay off. However, if success is measured by long-term acquisition of study skills and an extensive knowledge base, then a tutor may help only partially.

Much will be dependent on the student's own drive and initiative, and the capabilities and expertise of the tutor.

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