

An educational psychologist explains how to think about your ATAR and set post-school goals

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All this week and into next, Australian Year 12 students [are receiving](#) their final results.

As an educational psychologist, I know this is a momentous time for many [students](#), as their schooling and future prospects seem to come down to "one number". But it is also vital students and their families have perspective on the [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank](#) (or ATAR) and their goals going forward in their post-school lives.

What's really important about the ATAR?

Let's talk about the ATAR first. Yes, the ATAR matters. But not necessarily in the way students think it does.

Most of the focus and stress about ATARs revolve around what university course it can get students into. (Though some students have unconditional offers, that do not depend on their ATAR).

So, stepping back, the reason the ATAR matters is because it shapes the starting point of the post-school journey. It determines whether students get in the front door of what they want to study now. Or if they need to take a side route or two before they get into what they really want to study.

A detour can be a positive thing

We tend to focus on the "ATAR and then straight to uni" option, but there are many positive post-school educational and vocational pathways available to students.

A 2020 study [reviewed](#) 25 years of research using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth data.

This research has mapped students' movements post-school. Including to and through further study and training, to work and also taking a gap year. Across the [various studies](#) it reviewed, it was clear students pursue diverse pathways after school, including pathways into university, following time in the [vocational education](#) and training sector.

Our [research has also found university students](#) who have had a gap year are more motivated and engaged than students who did not. This is perhaps because students appreciate the value of education, develop [self-regulation](#) and self-direction while on their gap year, and gain further clarity about what they want to do with their lives.

So the ATAR does not determine where students end up as much as it shapes where they start and the way they get there. It is more journey-defining than destination-defining.

Now, think about your goals

As students look ahead to post-school life, they have a terrific opportunity to think about their goals and what is really important for them.

I say this because the emphasis on ATARs can lead students to set and strive for goals that are not always best for them.

In a few ways, the toughest part of the ATAR for Year 12 students is the R or rank. It is this R that makes Year 12 something of a zero-sum game: for one [student](#) to rank higher, another student must rank lower.

Assessments that rank students can fuel comparisons with others and competitive goals. Research shows competitive goals are okay while students are "winning" but they [can be de-motivating](#) if students don't win.

With the ATAR done and dusted (especially the R part!), students might find it helpful to shift their goals a bit.

The importance of PB goals

Personal best or PB goals are about competing with ourselves, rather than competing with others.

PB goals are linked to positive [academic](#) and [social-emotional outcomes](#).

This is because the focus on self-competition and self-improvement is energising, even when we don't succeed at first.

Try learning a new 'alphabet'

As students set and strive for PB goals now and in the years ahead, the "ABCD" of goal-setting can also be helpful to remember. This means they:

- **(A)** set goals that are **achievable**. Long-term goals are great, but setting a short-term goal that is achievable in the next week or so is the best way to get to these longer-term goals. It also gives you a feeling of accomplishing something along the way
- **(B)** set goals that are **believable**. Sometimes students set unrealistic goals they don't really believe they can reach (for example, "I'm going to study for three hours every day and get perfect scores"). When students set realistic goals, they are more likely to believe they can reach them, and are more motivated to work towards them
- **(C)** set goals that are **clear**. Being as specific as possible with

post-school goals means the action taken to reach the goal is more focused and on-target

- **(D)** set goals that are **desirable**. Striving for [goals](#) that students set and want for themselves is motivating.

Whether students are about to take a gap year, reassess their plans or head straight to university, vocational training or work, this is an important time. And there is lots of scope for [young people](#) to think positively about their futures without being defined by the R of that ATAR.

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