

University isn't right for everyone. Pushing young people to go can have devastating effects, say researchers

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(Names have been changed to protect identities.)

Australian [school](#) students feel immense pressure to go to [university](#), often at the exclusion of all other pathways, which can lead to devastating mental health effects.

That's among the headline findings of our decade-long program of research on the aspirations and post-school trajectories of young Australians.

Our [research](#), published today in the journal *[Educational Review](#)*, reveals the unintended consequences of government [higher education](#) policies, inadequate school career advice, and a wider public devaluing of the vocational [education](#) and training sector.

Our research

Since 2012, we've conducted one of the largest [studies](#) to date on the aspirations of Australian youth, involving more than 10,000 students in Years 3-12.

Recently, we followed up with 50 of these young people [post-school](#) to see where they ended up in terms of their career and educational pathways.

Our findings reveal some significant and, at times, devastating insights into how young Australians—particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds—have experienced the "push" towards higher education.

Pressure to attend university and the devaluing of TAFE

The young people in our research consistently said university was explicitly pushed as the only post-school [pathway](#) worth pursuing during

their schooling. Other pathways were often deemed to be "not good enough." One university graduate told us:

"I think there's quite a lot actually of [...] pressure given, not from all teachers, but some teachers, to really go towards higher education [...] I'd say I felt pressured as a group, or as like, as a generation [...] I just think that was just an overarching expectation."

This pressure frustrated some students. Angus* fulfilled his dream of becoming a chef by training at TAFE and eventually working in a top restaurant in London. In his first interview in 2014 he described restaurants as a place he "fits in."

However, he also told us he had been repeatedly told by his teachers that "cheffing's a horrible job":

"Almost every teacher at my school wanted to push me into their career path, [and I was told], "You're very smart [...] you should go to uni' [otherwise I] might not become successful [...] They always pushed me towards university. Regardless of what my feelings were, to be honest, I never felt truly supported by my career adviser."

Limited career education in school

Young people also overwhelmingly said the career education provided at school was unhelpful, impersonal, and pushed them towards university.

Career guidance was mainly focused on achieving a high ATAR (university entrance rank), with one student describing how her career adviser spent "more time trying to calculate my ATAR than imparting actual advice."

Alternative entry pathways into university often weren't openly discussed

or fully understood. Such pathways were often devalued in favor of achieving the best ATAR possible. One young person told us:

"I think with the pressure in schools on ATARs and that sort of thing—and they have to put that pressure on because they want you to do well. But it sort of develops a stigma around, well, if I don't do Year 11 and 12 [...], then I can't get into university, without [young people understanding] there's actually [alternative] pathways."

Stress and poor mental health

Many young people therefore felt high levels of stress and poor mental health during the final years of high school and the beginning of university, with some "losing the plot" or feeling "burnt out."

The most extreme mental ill health reported in our interviews was experienced by Dahlia, a young Indigenous woman.

When we first spoke to her in 2016, she was a high achieving Year 11 student with aspirations to become a criminal psychologist.

When we next spoke to her in 2021, she described how the pressure of Year 12 caused her to drop out of school. During this year, Dahlia had severe mental ill health and made an attempt to end her life.

She later completed a traineeship in [early childhood](#) and care before entering university to study for a combined degree in primary and early childhood teaching. Dahlia was eager for her experience to be a warning about the pressure and stress of Year 12 exams:

"It was just burnout, like, I was just so overwhelmed. I felt like I was so pressured to do the best, and I felt like I wasn't the best [...] then I'd get anxious about not being as good as everyone thinks I am [...] that's why I

really wanted to do this interview because I wanted to put it out there that high school is not the be all, end all [...] getting that high [Year 12] mark isn't the be all, end all. "

Where to from here?

The pressure to attend university compounds stress and poor mental health for some [young people](#). This isn't surprising given the transition to adulthood is the peak period for the [onset of mental disorders](#).

We must urgently address the limited career education available to students and the narrow version of success linked to Year 12 exams and the ATAR in schools and society.

This would involve:

- providing adequate training and resources to schools and career advisers
- raising the status of vocational education and careers; and
- valuing alternative pathways to university, such as enabling programs.

[The Universities Accord](#) (a major federal government-led review that seeks to "reimagine" higher education for the next 30 years) provides an opportunity to change the lives and trajectories of Australian students. Ensuring the higher education sector is fair and equitable is at the heart of this process.

Its [interim report](#) claims that "too few Australians are going to university." This is based on estimates that more than 50% of new jobs in the next five years will require a university degree.

However, the [skills gap](#) is even greater in technician and trade careers

[than professional occupations.](#)

This means the spotlight can't only be on universities; a focus on vocational education and training pathways (such as TAFE) is crucial too.

To confront the challenges of the coming century, we need a broader public conversation about the place of tertiary education—not just university—and the diverse educational and [career](#) pathways available.

More information: Felicia Jaremus et al, Pressure to attend university: beyond narrow conceptions of pathways to a "good life", *Educational Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2023.2287417](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2287417)

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