**MONASH University**

POLICY BITE 1

CHANGE FIVE THINGS:
Young people discuss what needs to change in the transition from school

THE PROBLEM

- COVID-19 has exacerbated the uncertainty and stress in young people's post-school transitions. Young people need support to address these concerns.

- The ways young people are assessed in their final years of schooling bears re-thinking in light of changes to schooling during the pandemic.

- Post-school transitions are not linear. Young people need access to guidance at different points—not always in school.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

- *Change 1:* Harness young people's curiosity.

- *Change 2:* Diversify how young people are assessed in their final years of schooling.

- *Change 3:* Improve careers education and practical skills acquisition.

- *Change 4:* Use digital technologies to provide post-school opportunities.

- *Change 5:* Increase student consultation.

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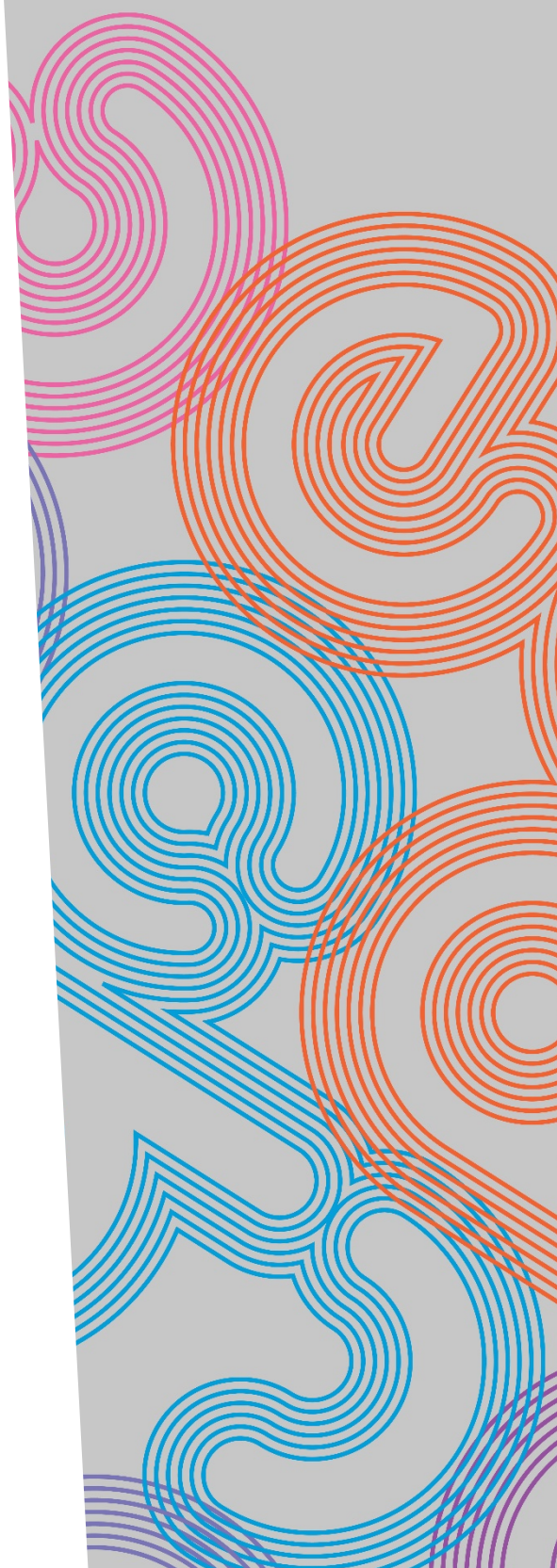
This Policy Bite is co-authored by researchers in the Centre of Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) and members of the CYPEP Youth Reference Group. It draws on personal experiences of Youth Reference Group members to critically reflect on the role and utility of final exams, before presenting five suggested changes.

THE PROBLEM

COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on student learning in some parts of Australia. Pandemic shutdowns led to disruptions which placed additional pressures on what is one of the most important times in many students' lives. Exams and assessments in these contexts have been <u>increasingly characterised by uncertainty and added stress</u>.

<u>Mission Australia found</u> that students have been concerned about how the challenges of lockdown will be accounted for in the calculation of their final assessments. Some students have found the stress too much, completing their VCE without sitting final exams and forgoing an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) in the process. As a result, <u>the fairness of end-of-school exams has been called into question</u>.

<u>Some</u> have called for greater support for students moving into the workforce. <u>Others</u> have advocated for alternatives to end-of-school assessments to mitigate the substantial stress associated with exams and allow students to demonstrate their learning using other forms of assessment.

As the transition to the next stage of the pandemic begins, key questions emerge about how best to support young people approaching the end of their schooling. Addressing these starts with three questions:

1. How can careers education better prepare young people for post-school life?

2. What role do measures such as the ATAR play in shaping young people for life after year 12?

3. Are the current ways that students are assessed in their final years of school fit for purpose?

THE CONTEXT

There are challenges to maintaining a healthy study/life balance while preparing for significant exams such as those at the end of school. However, for those wanting to pursue tertiary education, completing end-of-school exams and achieving good marks can often be the only pathway.

> *I was quite burnt out after high school and was very glad there was a long break between the end of exams and the start of university . . . The way the current system is designed, doing well in final year exams provides students with the best possible opportunities post-secondary-school if they wish to pursue tertiary education. [Andrew, 18]*

Alongside this, there can also be difficulties negotiating familial expectations and broader pressures to progress through school and onto university in a linear fashion.

Family, friends and other support systems of young people have an important role in school-leavers' decisions about their next steps. For instance, when parents express a preference that their children attend university, they are 11 times more likely to do so.

There was definitely an expectation/presumption from family (and subtly a lot of other people I knew such as friends and teachers) that I would naturally transition into a university course. Whilst I could have defied that assumption, the pressure was still there in the back of my mind. [Andrew, 18]

For young people, a sense of preparedness for post-school life can be lacking. Many young people can feel that school and university is more focused on knowledge acquisition, sometimes to the detriment of guidance on how to apply skills in post-education life.

I feel like they left me with a really narrow impression of what success looked like, and I wish there'd been more guidance during secondary school to broaden my thinking around what I could do next. [Mark, 22]

Ultimately, deciding on a post-school pathway is difficult. Challenges stem from feeling that there is limited information about what tertiary study in particular disciplines might look like, alongside deciding on a pathway that is both interesting and leads to secure employment.

At the time [of deciding on my post-school pathway], I think employability must've been the only thing on my mind because I started in an economics major—I had no idea whether I'd like it or not (spoiler: I didn't) and basically only chose it because I thought it would lead to a stable career. [Mark, 22]

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

Change 1: Harness young people's curiosity

There is a need for a greater focus on a 'whole person' approach which considers students as individuals with particular skills and interests beyond grades and exams.

The transition between high school and university is not only about academics, it is more about the cultivation of a sense of agency so that high-school graduates could feel empowered to make sound decisions confidently and responsibly. The curiosity that high school graduates have toward the world is precious and needs to be carefully guided. [Yuqi, 24]

In online learning contexts, formative teaching approaches which take into account the whole person are empathetic in nature and recognise students as people with intellectual, social, ethical and spiritual needs. While there

is an appetite for educational approaches that emphasise a more comprehensive view on learning, there is still a way to go implementing such approaches more broadly.

Change 2: Diversify how young people are assessed in their final years of schooling

Furthermore, there is a need for a more collaborative approach to assessment which examines aspects of performance that specifically serve young people's needs. This might include a portfolio of work combining written and oral work or regular small assessments.

Jurisdictions in Australia are already in the process of implementing alternative assessments. For example, drawing on two influential reports, 'Beyond ATAR' and 'Looking to the Future- Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training', South Australia is set to introduce an alternative system that draws on 'learner profiles' rather than a single ATAR score. In Parramatta NSW, the Catholic Education Diocese is developing a data-driven approach that provides a comprehensive view of student progress throughout their school careers in order to provide targeted support.

There is also value in considering approaches internationally. For example, assessment in the Finnish education system is based on localised and less centralised assessment regimes. Although there is almost no standardised testing for secondary school students, the Finnish assessment system ranks highly in international comparisons of educational excellence.

Change 3: Improve careers education

We also suggest that there is a need for improved support for career guidance.

> *Society needs diverse careers. That is what the career advisors could do to help students diagnose their strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to select the subjects based on their situations and relevant to their future careers. [Candice, 21]*

The need for improved career guidance is reiterated by the OECD, which has called for more 'effective systems of career guidance combined with a close engagement with the working world'. There is a gap in careers guidance support that transcends educational institutions such as school or university to provide advice to young people once they are no longer affiliated with such institutions.

Change 4: Use digital technologies to provide post-school opportunities

Digital technologies have been used to provide post-school opportunities, including virtual internships, prior to COVID-19. However, there are palpable opportunities for broader and increased applications to better support young peoples' transitions into the workforce.

The transformation of online learning/working offers exciting opportunities for young people to engage with different activities without geographical restrictions. For example, students could participate in virtual internship projects from the comfort of their homes. These opportunities could support students to move into the workforce with better preparation. [Yuqi, 24]

For instance, virtual internships have been found to help pre-service teachers develop technological pedagogical content knowledge and they have also been effectively implemented in the <u>hospitality industry</u> where the impacts of COVID-19-related closures have been particularly hard-felt. These cases suggest that, while virtual internships may not be broadly available in every industry, there are many potential applications for those seeking to support young people transitioning from school to work.

Change 5: **Increase student consultation**

Interweaving each of these suggestions is a need for improved youth representation in the policy-making process. Youth involvement in policy-making will help in the provision of effective support for young people in their final years of compulsory schooling.

One way for [young people] to be heard might be for DET [Department of Education and Training Victoria] to have a student advisory committee which can review/provide input on curricula and/or to encourage schools to set those up themselves. I don't think it's effective (or ethical, to be honest) to have these conversations about Year 12 without young people in the room. [Mark, 22]

Greater representation of young people's voices in decision-making processes would provide valuable insight and advice to government and statutory authorities on educational matters as well as on institutional practice. It would also <u>engender confidence, self-worth and democratic citizenship</u>, giving young people a sense that their actions can have an impact on their peers.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) Board, for example, currently has only <u>one student representative</u>. This is not enough. Large governing boards need student delegates who adequately represent the diverse student populations they oversee, or they must establish an accessible means of communication, such as a student advisory committee, where a wide range of students can provide input on decisions which affect them and their education.

SO WHAT?

Despite combined changes to the labour market, the erosion of linear pathways to careers and technological change, young people's career expectations have scarcely changed over the past 20 years. In fact, <u>the OECD</u> suggests that young people's career aspirations have become concentrated in fewer occupations, with young people across 41 countries reporting that they expect to work in one of just 10 popular jobs.

This suggests that young people might be unaware of different types of work in the digital age and that there is a persistent misalignment between young people's career aspirations and the educational qualifications required to achieve them. Harnessing young people's curiosity (Change 1) and improving careers education (Change 3) is crucial here, with the need for a career education curriculum that reflects the ever-changing labour market and emerging careers, such as digital marketing and social media influencers.

Careers education continues to reside at the periphery of schools, typically occurring towards the last years of schooling and focused on all-important final exam scores. Instead, there needs to be improved support for young people and the post-school transitions they go on to make, for which digital technologies could play an important role (Change 4).

Alongside this, educators and policy-makers must consider broader factors, such as how we measure success. There is a need to diversify how young people are assessed (Change 2) because the gravity of assessments (including NAPLAN and senior secondary assessments), as well as the ATAR, may be pulling education away from its wider purposes.

> *Whilst the ATAR can be important for post-school education, there are many dimensions the ATAR does not measure, such as extra-curricular and service activities, which can be formative for life after school. [Rebecca, 21]*

However, as suggested in Change 5, it is crucial that young people are involved in these discussions. The decisions made directly impact them and their education: they deserve a voice.

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