

Teachers could be called on to estimate year 12 student grades – this is fairer than it sounds

Written by Jim Tognolini, Director, Centre for Educational Measurement and Assessment, University of Sydney

Following a meeting with states and territories, federal education minister, [Dan Tehan said](#) year 12 students were a priority, and were being sent a clear signal: “There will be no year 13. There will be no mass repeating”.

He also said students seeking an ATAR for 2020 would be able to use it to apply for entry to university in the normal way.

The intention to retain current practices in these difficult times is encouraging. It should be a source of comfort for year 12 students facing a disruptive preparation for their end of year assessments.

Business as usual

It must be remembered the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) is [just a percentile-rank](#) of student performance based on their aggregate of assessments across designated subjects they sit for in the final year (or two) of schooling.

Read more: [*What actually is an ATAR? First of all it's a rank, not a score*](#)

It is calculated in each jurisdiction that issues a year 12 credential and there is no requirement these aggregate assessments be the same. In fact, not all jurisdictions use external subject exams. Most combine these exams with moderated school-based assessments, and others such as the ACT, don't have external subject exams at all.

So, when [the minister said](#) each jurisdiction will decide the end-of-year assessment process in their jurisdiction and that “we all are going to endeavour [...] to make sure that this year's ATAR scores are the same as last year's ATAR scores”, he is saying it's business as usual.

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The difference will occur at each jurisdiction level where the appropriate authorities will be working to consider a number of scenarios to ensure the evidence (assessments) used to construct the ATAR for their jurisdiction is as valid (fair) and reliable (consistent) as possible for their students.

The best scenario would be that the COVID-19 crisis dissipates in time for jurisdictions to apply their normal assessment procedures. But this may not be possible in some instances, such as where students have to complete a body of work and can no longer use school facilities.

So a number of other scenarios would be considered as the conditions change.

Teacher estimates

If it's not possible to have traditional assessments such as exams at all, one option used in the past for a number of purposes is to have teachers provide an "estimate or prediction". This is what they believe the student would get on the exam or assessment based on their knowledge of the assessment and all the evidence they have from the students' work up to, and including, the last day of school in 2020.

This is not as extreme as it may appear. There is significant [evidence to suggest](#) teacher estimates are as reliable and stable as traditional examination results.

A [report investigating the accuracy](#) of predicted grades for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Centre (UCAS) in the UK found just under 90% of grades were accurately predicted to within one grade.

Teachers have the data from past exams and assessments and can reliably predict how their student would do.

Read more: [COVID-19 has thrown year 12 students' lives into chaos. So what](#)

[can we do?](#)

Some people could worry teachers may have biases towards some students that would lend them to give some students a higher or lower mark than they would otherwise get. But teachers don't make these marks up. They do so based on evidence of what the student has already achieved and this informs their estimate.

Another [recent study](#) based on a sample of 10,000 students in the UK, showed teacher assessments during compulsory education are as reliable and stable as standardised exam scores.

In a later Conversation article

Read more: [Don't worry about cancelled exams – research shows we should switch to teacher assessment permanently](#)

, the authors of the study said

We can – and should – trust teacher assessments as indicators of pupils' achievement.

One of the most compelling arguments regarding the reliability of teacher estimates is that external examinations are validated against the teacher estimates. If the results from examinations gave totally different results from what the teachers expect, there would be a significant public outcry against the validity of examinations.

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Another concern about relying on teachers is that they may [inflate grades due to pressure](#) from parents or students.

In Australia, most examination authorities either currently collect teacher estimates or have done in the past to provide evidence to support decisions for anomalous cases and situations – just like we are experiencing now. So jurisdictions would monitor the teacher estimates to make sure they are consistent with historical data.

Any anomalies due to grade inflation would then be picked up.

Just do your best

Ideally, traditional exams can be carried out in the way students know and expect.

But students and the education community in general should take comfort in knowing if this is not possible, there are other ways to produce reliable scores that can be used for ATARs in 2020.

The best way for students to maximise ATAR scores is to focus their energies on maximising their performance in each of the subjects they are currently taking. They can rely on the jurisdictions to make sure student performance is based on the best evidence available.

NESA provides the University of Sydney \$500,000 per year over 4 years to support the establishment of the Centre.

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