

Schools and universities welcome alternative to Year 12 exams

By [Pallavi Singhal](#)

Students from three low-performing Sydney high schools will soon be able to get into university without having to sit HSC exams or get an ATAR under special agreements with a growing number of universities around Australia.

School and university leaders have championed a portfolio-based program that is being offered as an alternative to HSC subjects at Liverpool Boys High School, St John's Park High School and Sydney Secondary College Balmain Campus as a way to help disadvantaged students do better in high school and at university.



Liverpool Boys High School students Jamiel Yasin, 15, and Jacky Zhu, 14, are doing the portfolio-based Big Picture program instead of traditional year 9 and 10 classes

Under the program, which was developed by international non-profit firm Big Picture Education, students choose an area of interest in year 11 and do a weekly internship, write a senior thesis, exhibit work at the end of year 12 and write an 80-page autobiography.

"Now they don't need to sit the HSC because standardised exams aren't what we think education should be about," said Angelina Bea, who coordinates the program at Liverpool Boys High School, where it will be offered to year 11 students from next year.



Year 7 students at Liverpool Boys High School are taught through project-based learning instead of traditional classes.

"We're realising that we're not getting our students into university," Ms Bea said.

"This is something that's better suited to us as a low socioeconomic school with lots of students who have a language background other than English or come to us as refugees."

Big Picture has reached initial agreements with seven universities around Australia including Australian National University and the University of Newcastle, which have accepted five students on the basis of their portfolios for the first time this year, into biomedical science, business law, education, physiotherapy and Asian studies degrees.

The company is currently in talks with eight other universities, including some in Sydney, a spokesman for Big Picture said.

Dean of education at the University of Newcastle, Professor John Fischetti, said the university was trialling the program as an alternative entry pathway, but it would likely "continue indefinitely because of the success we sense through the small pilot".

"Our thinking is that they'll be better prepared [for university], and the students we have met certainly are," Professor Fischetti said.

"With the ATAR approach, we don't know much about the student, we only know their score."

Professor Fischetti said all degree areas were available to Big Picture students, who needed to demonstrate their suitability for the degree through their portfolio.

"There's probably not a direct pathway to medicine but that doesn't mean they can't do a related degree for a year and then move laterally," he said.

Australian National University's deputy vice-chancellor Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington said its agreement with Big Picture was part of a broader shift away from the ATAR system.

"[ANU's vice-chancellor Professor Brian Schmidt] has ... said that in 2018, ANU will begin changing admissions so that ATAR is not the only consideration for entry," Professor Hughes-Warrington said.

"Reliance on ATAR as sole criteria for entry skews the ANU student population to a less diverse group of students than is appropriate for the national university."

The Big Picture program is currently offered at 34 schools across Australia, with most schools in regional areas of NSW and Western Australia.

Ahead of the introduction of the Big Picture program for year 11 students, Liverpool Boys High School has overhauled classes across years seven to 10.

All students now complete the curriculum through project-based learning rather than taking traditional subjects and 31 year 9 and year 10 students are doing internships and portfolio projects under a Big Picture stream.

Jamiel Yasin, 15, spends one day a week working with a video production company in Marrickville.

"I became interested in film in year 6 but I really didn't know anything about it," Jamiel said. "Since I started [the internship], I've learnt how they film, how they edit, the programs they're using ... I'm becoming more interested as I learn more.

"I think I'll maybe go to uni and study filmmaking or go to film school."

Jamiel said he has been more productive since he began the Big Picture program.

"In mainstream school I'm not focused, but here I have my own learning space and it's based on my interests," he said.

The school's principal Mike Saxon said about 100 teachers from 30 schools across Sydney had visited Liverpool Boys since it changed its teaching methods in 2015.

"There's been enormous interest, teachers from a variety of schools have come to us to find out what we're doing," Mr Saxon said.