Call for 'learner profile' of students to end dominance of ATAR

A federally commissioned report wants high school students to focus on building a "learner profile" that reflects the skills and knowledge they have gathered over 13 years of education instead of worrying about how to boost their ATAR.

The proposed profile would include non-scholastic experience such as work, sport and volunteering alongside academic results and would reflect skills such as collaboration and problem solving.

A review of pathways from senior school to work, released by federal Education Minister Dan Tehan on Thursday, also found careers advice across schools was patchy and needed to be strengthened so students could better understand their options.

The review's chairman, Peter Shergold, who is also chancellor of Western Sydney University and chairman of the NSW Education Standards Authority, said students often chose easier or unsuitable subjects to inflate their ATAR.

Many students and parents confused the Higher School Certificate, the NSW school-leaving credential, with the ATAR, a ranking system used by universities to select students for popular courses, leaving many thinking their ATAR was a reflection of their school career.

It also left students choosing non-ATAR, vocational subjects feeling second-rate. While the ATAR should not be scrapped, its importance should be minimised, Professor Shergold said.

A learner profile would shift emphasis to skills developed by all students, such as leadership, collaboration and problem-solving. "[The ATAR] suggests you have to make a choice in your life between higher education and vocational education," he said.

"And yet when students come to adulthood, they will find that they will increasingly move between – that they will do some university, they will study vocational education, they will do micro-credentialling.

"We are saying you don't just learn complex problem-solving by studying maths or science, or indeed by doing vocational education. You can learn complex problem-solving by being captain of the netball team."

The learner profile should form the basis of a digital education passport, which students could continue to curate into adulthood by adding new qualifications or experience, the review suggested.

The report, *Looking to the Future*, said school systems must ensure students had highly qualified career advisors who understood the labour market and the changing nature of job requirements and could facilitate partnerships with industries.
"Overall, the quality of careers advice now provided at school is inadequate," said Professor Shergold.

The report also called on governments to improve data collection from schools, tertiary institutions and workplaces to give policy-makers a better understanding about why students make decisions, and "why, too often, they drop out".

Big Picture Australia, an organisation that works with schools to create university pathways that do not involve the ATAR, is already developing a learner profile in conjunction with the University of Melbourne.

Chief executive Viv White welcomed the report, but said the change in emphasis Professor Shergold wants to encourage would not happen unless the ATAR was dumped. "The shift won't happen unless the ATAR is abolished," she said.

Jenine Smith, president of the Careers Advisors Association of NSW, backed Professor Shergold's calls for a more consistent emphasis on careers education across school systems, saying high-quality advice was essential for students' futures.

"The school system does not suit everyone, and the opportunities [vocational education] provides make a lot of difference," she said.

Kim Paino, from the University Admissions Centre, said the ATAR was only one facet of a student's results, and was only important for those who intended to go to university.

"We've always maintained that it's a worthwhile exercise to look at all facets of a student, but for university entry academic ability is important," she said. "We feel at this point in time that for year 12, the ATAR is as good a measure as any."