**Elite selective high schools deliver only small ATAR gains**

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Selective-entry schools only marginally improve students' ATARs according to new research that questions whether elite state schools boost academic performance.

Students at selective-entry high schools achieve ATARs that are at most two points higher, on average, than similar students elsewhere.

The University of Melbourne research suggests that high-achieving students will do well at any school.

“Our results point to small effects in terms of university entrance ranks,” it said.

Nossal High School student Ryan Wijaya says there is more to his school than high ATARs *CREDIT:CHRIS HOPKINS*

Researchers Brendan Houng and Chris Ryan from the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research tracked the performance of two groups of students who sat entrance exams for selective-entry state high schools.

One group was offered year 9 spots at the sought-after schools, while the other group missed out or turned down their offer.

All students achieved similar NAPLAN results in years 7 and 9, were highly motivated and were disproportionately from immigrant and advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Mr Houng hoped his research would lead to a less narrow focus on academic achievement at selective-entry schools.

"One might easily think that selective schools might be more successful in helping students achieve higher ATARs, simply for the fact that on average, only high-ability students enter these schools," he said.

"But this is a form of sorting that we economists call a 'selection effect'."

While two ATAR points doesn’t sound like much, the researchers noted it could be the difference between being accepted into a student's desired university course or missing out.

There are four selective-entry high schools in Victoria: Melbourne High School, Mac.Robertson Girls' High School, Nossal High School and Suzanne Cory High School.

While selective-entry schools consistently achieve some of the state's top VCE results, they have been criticised for draining neighbouring schools of their brightest and often socio-economically advantaged students. Some academics believe they are compounding inequity in the education system.

Ryan Wijaya, a year 12 student at Nossal High School, said grades played a minor role in his decision to move to a selective-entry school.

The Victorian Student Representative Council executive member was attracted to Nossal High because he saw how happy his older brother was at the school.

"That's all I wanted from school," he said. "I just wanted to be happy."

He also likes working alongside like-minded students, who are ambitious and understand the privilege of attending the popular school in Melbourne's south-east.

The 18-year-old said while the research focused on ATARs, it ignored all the important things students learn at school.

"You also have to take into account a student's wellbeing and growth, their happiness, stress levels and support," he said.

"Two points extra is great, but what is also great is the process to get there."

He's not sure what he wants to do when he's older, but is considering studying physiotherapy or working as a pastor at his church.

A Victorian Education Department spokesman said the study highlighted the value of Victoria's network of select-entry schools.

“In addition to raising educational outcomes, Victoria’s selective-entry schools provide supportive environments where high-achieving students are challenged academically and are able to mix with students from all walks of life, further enriching their secondary school experience," he said.



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