Raw marks not the dividing line between success and failure

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Walt Disney assured generations of children that "if you can dream it, you can do it". JK Rowling has put it this way: "We don't need magic to transform our world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already." Both of which merely reinforce that old 17th century English proverb, "To him that will, ways are not wanting".

But for those thousands of Year 12 students who went into their final exams with inspirational quotes tacked to their bedroom walls, results are too often seen as the dividing line between success and failure.

The media will understandably focus on the state's jubilant 99.95-ers and award winners.

But there will be another sizeable group of students that has fallen short of the required ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank), so have missed out on their first, second, third or even all their choices of university courses.

It shouldn't be so black and white. And, in fact, increasingly it isn't.

What many students and their parents don't realise is that there are a growing number of alternative pathways to university entry and new ways of acknowledging student achievement on graduation.

Australian university students now graduate not only with proof of their academic achievements but with an Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement, that in many cases recognises what we call co-curricular activities – activities that reflect, and help to foster, personal qualities and skills we see as vital to a well rounded graduate.

At the entry stage, while we do need universities full of Australia's brightest students, we know a single measure risks excluding other students with considerable academic potential and risks ignoring other important markers of success – like motivation, determination, passion and talent for a chosen field.

This is not to undermine anyone's ATAR.

The ATAR, and its predecessor the Universities Admissions Index (UAI), have proved to be generally reliable indicators at the high end. That means we are, in most cases, admitting students with the right aptitude and attitude to succeed in their course when they achieve scores in the 90s. Lower ATARs, however, are less indicative of student potential.

But an ATAR ranking is still just a number on paper, which can't tell us anything about the dynamism, or otherwise, of a candidate, or whether or not he or she has applied for the course right for them. Ironically, we have often found high performing students feel pressured not to "waste their ATAR", so apply for medicine and law, for example, when they really want to do teaching.
That's why in extremely competitive areas like medicine, universities now rely on a combination of ATAR, personal interview and the Undergraduate Medical Entry Test to ensure the right candidates are filling limited places. Even then, students who miss out can enrol in Medical Science with a lower ATAR of 92.80 (2010 entry) and apply to transfer to medicine the following year if they excel. There are similar possibilities in many fields.

There are alternative pathways into undergraduate programs for educationally disadvantaged students and for students over 21 who often bring maturity, experience and a clearer idea of their direction to university.

Under UNSW’s HSC Plus program, introduced in 2007, students who miss out on direct entry using their ATAR, but have outstanding marks in those HSC subjects which correspond directly to the course they want to take, are given bonus points. Similar programs have since been introduced Australia-wide with good results. We also recognise that the dedication and motivation it takes to achieve elite status in sport or the arts equips students particularly well for university, so we offer flexible entry to UNSW for these high achievers.

The next logical step is to apply similar creativity to university life. We are fostering those attributes that we know help equip students for the workforce and to contribute to the wider community – and documenting these outcomes on graduation.

Education does not only take place in lecture halls, classrooms or labs. A student who pursues competitive internships, who opts to go on exchange overseas, who offers his or her services as a mentor or who takes part in competitive sport or voluntary service projects, locally or overseas, cannot help but learn and grow. Thus the introduction of the Graduation Statement.

Next year, UNSW's new Advantage program will offer students more than 500 accredited co-curricular activities that can be officially recognised in the statement. Employers have long been telling us that they need more than grades to assess job applicants. The Advantage scheme will make it easier for employers to identify the personal qualities they are looking for.

Grades and marks will continue to be the primary indicators of academic success. But flexibility and creativity in measuring student potential at entry and student achievement at graduation will better align tertiary courses with real world demands.

By simply exploring university websites or contacting student services, aspiring students and their parents can find out which new programs can best help them meet their personal goals. In the process we hope we'll have gone that bit further towards proving Walt Disney, JK Rowling and our grandmothers ("where there's a will, there's a way") right.