

National Children's Commissioner examination of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children

SUBMISSION:

Is the Year 12 ENTER score the best way of presenting results or an avoidable cause of student anxiety and depression?

We believe the correlation of self-harm, depression and suicidal behavior to the design of education policy is under-researched.

It is logical that exam pressures increase anxiety and our point is not that exams should be avoided, but that it is possible that the presentation of results in the contemporary system is unnecessarily adding to student stress levels, particularly in Year 12. While schools in recent decades have devoted themselves to avoiding ranking students, the Year 12 exam ranks students in the order of .01% and many schools publish 'top results' and make this ranking the focus of their marketing. We believe that a study correlating teenage depression and the increasingly competitive marketing of Year 12 scores would be revealing. There is much anecdotal evidence of dissatisfaction with Year 12 education by teachers, students and parents where it is believed that Year 12 is now 'all about the ENTER score number'.

If a statistically significant correlation between the increasing emphasis on ENTER scores and student depression is found, the question then is: what can be done?

Past education models are worth studying. We believe that the introduction of an amalgamated score, that has become the ENTER score, should be examined as a turning point. Prior to this, for example in WA until the late 1970's, students were provided only with their individual subject marks and top students were publicly acknowledged with an 'Exhibition'. It was difficult, and somewhat pointless, for individuals to compare the results of a range of different subjects. Most relevant to students was whether or not they were accepted into the course of their choice and this information was provided without an amalgamated ENTER score. Universities using an algorithm to rank students in order to select

their intake did not make this algorithm or numeric result public. Year 12 was not ‘all about the number’.

Given that amalgamated ENTER scores are somewhat subjective (rankings change if English is compulsorily included, for example) the focus on this number which students are reminded ‘will follow them for the rest of their lives’, is questionable. Students wishing to make international applications are required to sit separate exams and those wishing to transfer interstate could provide subject results for universities to apply their assessment algorithms.

The single ENTER score that has schools, parents and student peers unwittingly burdening students unnecessarily with enormous additional stress is not essential to the education system and it is our belief that it could be eliminated with no negative impact on education standards and a positive impact on mental health.

An examination of the impact on mental health and education outcomes of not providing ENTER scores may also produce useful information for the presentation of the results of NAPLAN tests for which there is increasing anecdotal reporting of increased anxiety among very young students.

C Cornish for the GI Thinktank

22 May 2014