

# Big Picture model part of alternative education push to improve Australia's school system



Kristin Van Wick used a personal portfolio for her university admission. (ABC News: Louise Miolin)

- **In short:** An alternative education model called Big Picture, which runs in many high schools across Australia, boasts a student-led curriculum and no exams.
- The stereotype that alternative education is only for "disruptive" students is not the case, educators in the system say.
- **What's next?** A diverse range of learning styles and a reduced focus on a university admission score could improve Australia's education system, some researchers argue.

Kristin Van Wyk didn't sit exams to get into university.

Instead, the now 21-year-old used a personalised portfolio she created in year 12, after completing a hands-on high school curriculum she designed herself.

Kristin is a graduate of Big Picture, an alternative education program that runs in dozens of high schools around Australia and also has a dedicated campus in Launceston, Tasmania.

"I'm a lot more independent than a lot of other people my age [as a result], I think," Ms Van Wyk said, who went to the Big Picture school for years 9 to 12.



Kristin is an undergraduate student at the University of Tasmania. (ABC News: Louise Miolin)

"Personal motivation" is a central tenet of the model, which sees students guided to develop a personalised curriculum based on their interests.

Students also learn on the job. If a child wants to be a mortician, for example, they approach one to shadow.

The ABC visited the Launceston Big Picture School to speak with students and teachers.

"I'm hoping to be able to get a look into how they prepare their bodies for funerals ... [I've been interested in this] since grade 7," one student said.



Many schools around Australia have Big Picture programs but there is also a dedicated campus in northern Tasmania. *(ABC News: Louise Miolin)*

Others are headed to workplaces as diverse as art galleries to coding companies and farms.

Big Picture School principal Cindy Johnston said this practical experience built job-ready, independent graduates.

"Having a passion or interest and that willingness to explore ... you have to be fairly self-directed, because there's a lot of accountability and responsibility."



Cindy Johnston guides students through self-designed curriculums.(ABC News: Louise Miolin)

It is believed tens of thousands of Australian students take part in "alternative" education models outside the traditional university admission system, which relies heavily on an ATAR — or Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank — a number between zero and 99.95 that shows a student's position in their year group.

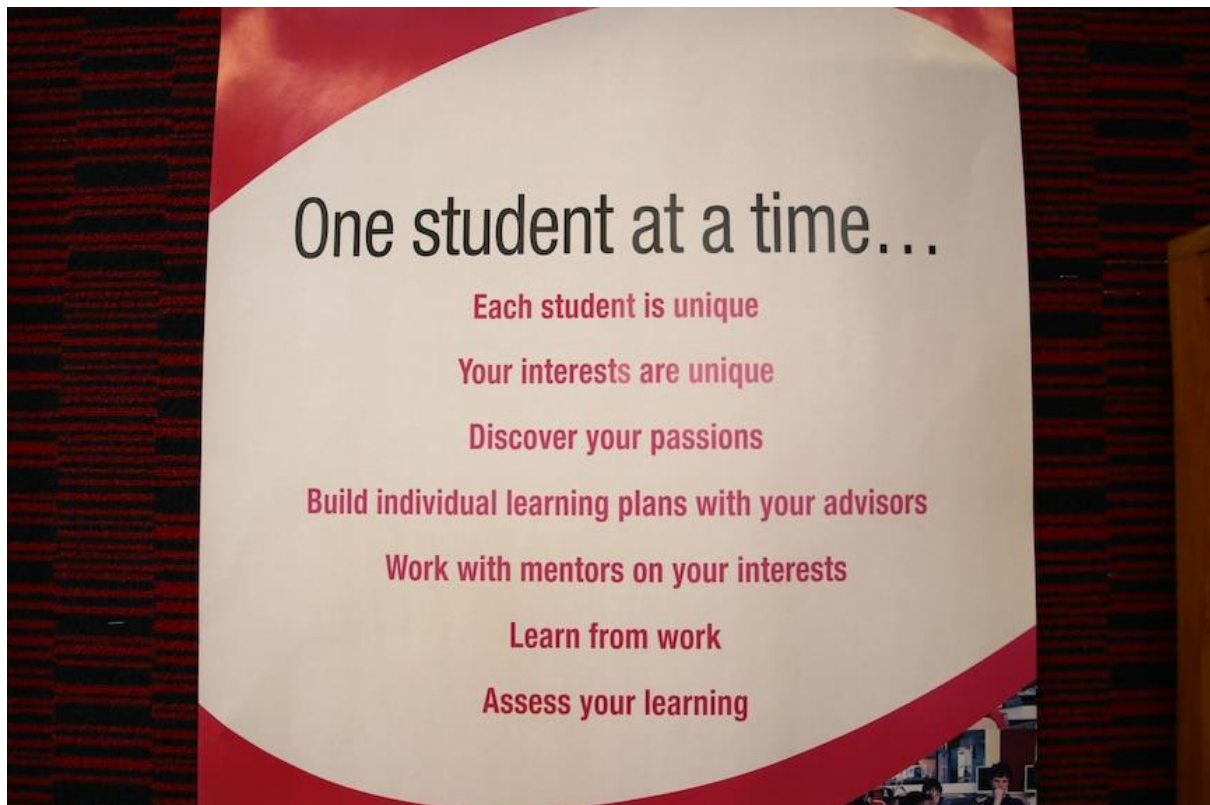
While many educators who the ABC spoke to suggest alternative education models should not replace traditional schools, they argue a diverse range of learning styles and a reduced focus on ATAR could improve Australia's education system.

## **'Exhibitions' take place of exams**

Big Picture's assessment system substitutes exams with "exhibitions", where students present their work and answer questions from teachers and family.

"You have to publicly stand up in front of all the important people in your world, and say, 'This is what I've been learning about, and this is what I've done'," Ms Johnston said.

"There is a lot of expectation and accountability."



The Big Picture program is designed to cater to individual students. (*ABC News: Louise Miolin*)

Rather than receiving grades in traditional subjects, students are assessed against the International Big Picture Learning Credential, or IBPLC.

The IBPLC measures students against outcomes such as "empirical reasoning" and "communication and personal qualities".

It specifically avoids ranking students against one another, as an ATAR does.

Ms Van Wyk used the IBPLC and a portfolio to apply to the University of Tasmania.



Outside of her studies, Ms Van Wyk runs a non-profit gymnastics organisation. (ABC News: Morgan Timms)

"It definitely gave me the skills that I needed," she said.

Ms Van Wyk has dyslexia and dysgraphia, which she said were barriers for reading and writing in traditional classrooms.



Ms Van Wyk says she takes longer to read and absorb information than her peers. *(ABC News: Morgan Timms)*

She said she felt isolated and left behind in the mainstream system, but the Big Picture program let her learn in her own style and at her own pace.

"They didn't print things on A3 pieces of paper or explain it to me like I was four years old," she said.

"I'm obviously not stupid. I just take a little bit longer to read things.

"When I came [to Big Picture], I could just learn."



Kristin says she felt left behind in mainstream classrooms. *(ABC News: Morgan Timms)*

## **Tens of thousands of students enrolled in 'alternative' education**

More than 70,000 Australian students were enrolled in "flexible and alternative" education in Australia, according to conservative estimates from a 2014 study from the Victoria Institute.

It found the majority of students enrolled in these programs were marginalised or came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Education policy consultant Megan O'Connell does not think models such as Big Picture should completely replace traditional classrooms, but says they could boost declining high school attendance rates.





Megan O'Connell says there is too much focus on the ATAR system in Australia's schools. *(Supplied: Megan O'Connell)*

Data from the Productivity Commission show the school attendance rate for Australian students in year 1 to 10 fell to 88 per cent in 2023, down from 92 per cent a decade ago.

"We're needing to look at different ways of engaging and assessing young people," Ms O'Connell said.

## **ATAR draws criticism**

According to Ms O'Connell's research, only a quarter of young people achieve an ATAR and use it to get into university, yet ATAR remains the sole focus for many schools.

"[Students] are not supported to recognise and cultivate that full range of skills that they have. Their whole focus is often on those exams at the end of the year," she said.

That is a sentiment shared by the director of Monash University's Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice.

The centre's Professor Lucas Walsh said the ATAR system attracted criticism from education researchers across the country.

"Many researchers believe ATAR is unhelpful," he said.

"It creates a centre of gravity that takes away from teaching and learning, and it's not representative of the whole child."

Professor Walsh said adding alternative methods to the current system would be ideal, but it was a hard task as schools were "already overwhelmed" by funding issues and teacher attrition.

"Making space for alternative models becomes particularly challenging, despite the fact they have proven benefits," he said.

## **Alternative education not just for 'bad' kids**

Both Ms O'Connell and Ms Johnson said the stereotype of alternative education programs being only for 'disruptive' students who fall behind in mainstream classrooms was not the case.

"It's really unfortunate [alternative models] are seen as the pathways of last resort, rather than the way that young people can find themselves," Ms O'Connell said.

The Big Picture program interviews students to assess their suitability for the program, and Ms Johnston says students must be self-directed and disciplined to thrive in her school.

"If you want to be shy and hide, this is probably not the space," she said.

Given the lack of structure in a Big Picture classroom, you'd be forgiven for thinking the kids would run amuck.

But Ms Johnston said ditching timetables and uniforms had minimised behavioural issues by removing some of the barriers students face in regular classrooms.

"From the time they walk in the door, and they have the wrong shoes or the wrong uniform, or it's 'I can't learn in that way' or 'I struggle with that'," she said.

"[At Big Picture] they don't have to change who they are to come and learn."

Kristin Van Wyk's only regret was that she could not start Big Picture earlier.

"If this is where I've gotten from learning this way from year 9 to year 12, imagine if I had started learning these skills in year 7."