

DEBATE

N E W T O N

VS

G A L I L E O

MEDIATED BY

E L E A N O R

R O O S E V E L T

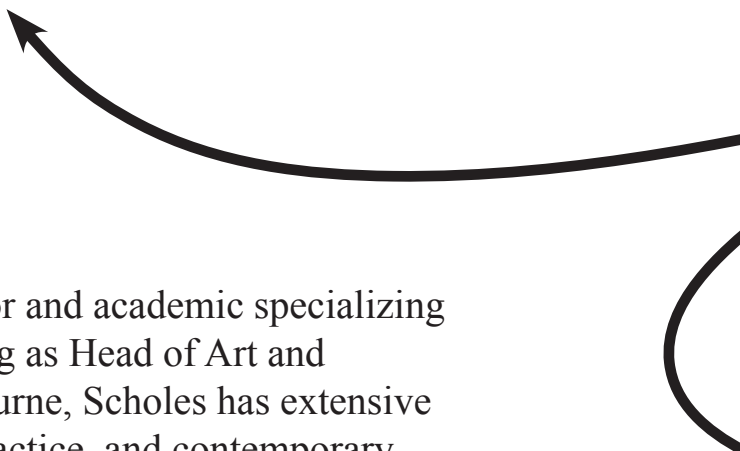
THEME

*if the ATAR ranking system
disadvantages students choosing
creative subjects, what happens to
the continual prospect of art as a
viable option?*

UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM

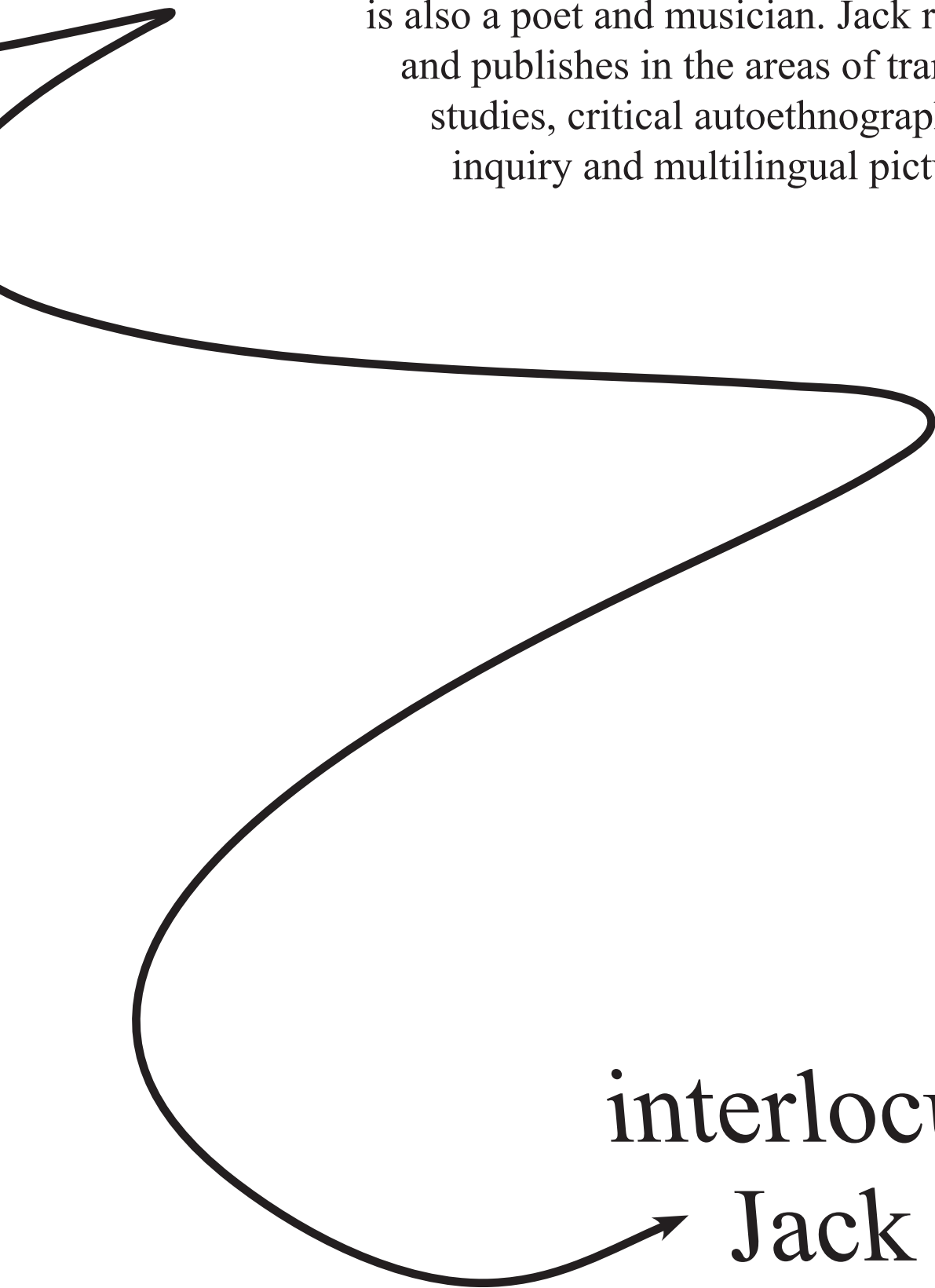
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MATTERS *NO ART***

Yudha Scholes & Kim Percy authors



Yudha Scholes is an experienced educator and academic specializing in visual arts education. Currently serving as Head of Art and Teacher of Art at Scotch College, Melbourne, Scholes has extensive expertise in curriculum design, studio practice, and contemporary art pedagogy. His work focuses on fostering creative thinking, critical inquiry, and inclusive art practices within educational settings. Scholes' teaching integrates both theoretical and practical approaches, encouraging students to engage with diverse artistic traditions while developing their own creative voice. His professional interests include arts-based research, interdisciplinary learning, and the role of visual culture in shaping contemporary education. Through his leadership and teaching, he is committed to advancing innovative approaches to art education and supporting emerging artists in academic environments.

Dr Kim Percy is a designer, visual artist, and educator whose practice spans higher education, vocational training, and independent research. She holds a PhD in Visual Arts from Federation University Australia, where her doctoral research examined dyslexia through the lens of visual art and creativity. She lectures in design, photography and theory at the Australian College of the Arts (Collarts), visual art at Federation University and holds an Adjunct Researcher position at Federation University Australia. As Head of Training at re:Think Dyslexia, she develops and delivers neuroinclusive programs grounded in Universal Design for Learning. Her research interests centre on neurodivergence, inclusive pedagogy, and creative practice. Her work has been presented at national and international conferences, including the British Dyslexia Association Conference, ACUADS and Art Education Victoria.



Jack Tan is Lecturer in Education at the University of Melbourne; Adjunct Associate with the non/fictionLab at RMIT University and Literary Fellow at Ormond College. He is also a poet and musician. Jack researches and publishes in the areas of transcultural studies, critical autoethnography, poetic inquiry and multilingual picturebooks.

interlocutor
Jack Tan

A Dramatic Dialogue Concerning Art, Neurodivergence and ATAR: A Modern Inquiry into Educational Equity through the eyes of the past

Yudha Scholes and Kim Percy

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Introduction

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a complex system that ranks final year secondary students in Australia based on standardised testing (VTAC 2025). Students take a minimum of four or five subjects, and, through a series of assessments, they are graded according to achievement. The testing occurs in the final year of focused study and encompasses the grades for all class projects and exams. In addition, the system requires a nuanced calibration based on other students' achievements before a score can be determined. The system incurs some bias towards mathematics, science and languages and against creative subjects such as art, music and performance (Matrix Education 2025; Excel Academics 2025). This essay aims to unravel some of the biases and consider the impact on less traditionally academic and neurodivergent students. The fictional voices of three eminent thinkers, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton and Eleanor Roosevelt, guide this discussion as a creative device to unpack the complexities of the debate. The question posed here is, if the ATAR ranking system disadvantages students choosing creative subjects, what happens to the continual prospect of art as a viable option? More specifically, it asks, do art subjects support neurodivergent students, and does the ATAR scoring system disadvantage these students? The narrator serves to frame the argument's sincerity within an ironic and dialogic structure aligned with metamodernist sensibilities. This approach elucidates both the underlying claims and their broader implications by staging an imagined exchange among three distinct intellectual figures, thereby foregrounding tensions through structured dialogue. Galileo is cast as the proponent of paradigmatic transformation, representing a free-thinking scholar who historically employed a dialogic and non-confrontational mode of expression to mitigate resistance from contemporary academic institutions – an approach that parallels the methodological stance adopted in this paper. Newton, by contrast, operates as the guardian of established epistemological frameworks, reflecting his historical tendency to curate his philosophical positions in order to maintain alignment with the institutions that supported his work. Finally, Eleanor Roosevelt functions as a mediating presence, synthesising humanitarian values with a commitment to equitable knowledge practices, consistent with her historical role as an advocate for social justice and inclusive discourse. These thinkers



Archie Usher, *Matter over Mind*, 2025. Permission by the artist.¹

represent the author's views that exposing systemic bias can elicit institutional resistance from those invested in preserving the status quo.

The Debate

Draw back the curtain to reveal the fictional stage set as a university auditorium in Melbourne. The room is bathed in morning light, and the date is somewhere in the near future. Three chairs are arranged on the stage: one large, imposing chair for Newton, a comfortable chair for Roosevelt at centre, and a stool for Galileo at the front. The three scholars gather to explore the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR), a system guiding university admissions.

Roosevelt clears her throat and addresses her colleagues.

Roosevelt: Dear colleagues, we've come together to consider the ATAR, a numerical measure that influences the paths of Australia's youth, and the education systems which guide them. Galileo, you question its fairness; Newton, you support its merit. Shall we begin with reason? What is the ATAR, and why does it stir such discussion?

Newton stands and turns to the audience, seated in tiered rows. His voice carries to the eager students before him.

Newton: Let me begin. The ATAR, established in 2009, is a percentile rank, ranging from 0 to 99.95, reflecting Year 12 students' performance across the nation.² Here in Victoria, the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) combines scores from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) to create a consistent standard for university entry. Other states undertake a similar process. I believe it's fair, Eleanor, that examinations measure diligence and intellect in a uniform way, preparing students for demanding fields like medicine or law.

Newton steps back to allow Galileo room to comment.

Galileo tilts his head with a light-hearted smile.

Galileo: That's a concise introduction, Newton, though I see room for concern. Aristotle taught us to 'treat like cases as like', suggesting justice means fitting assessments to diverse minds.³ Yet the ATAR relies on text-heavy, time-limited exams to moderate all results. This may not suit visual-spatial learners, perhaps one third of us,⁴ who thrive in seeing patterns and solving problems holistically. These abilities, so useful for innovation, grow through art training, which nurtures creativity.

He stops, allowing time for his words to land, then turns back to Newton.

Galileo: I wonder, then, why the ATAR leans so heavily on language-based recall and convergent thinking rather than rewarding creative strengths?

Roosevelt steps in.

Roosevelt: An interesting point, Galileo.

She turns to Newton.

Roosevelt: How would you respond to this concern about favouring textual memory?

Newton settles back into his large, imposing chair on the stage and waves the question away.

Newton: I appreciate the concern. Exams do test discipline alongside understanding, and sequential reasoning, vital for fields like Science or Law, often requiring focus under time limits. Visual-spatial skills are valuable, no doubt, but perhaps less broadly needed. The scaling process aims for balance: challenging subjects like Specialist Mathematics might turn a raw 35 score into a 48, while arts like Music scale more modestly, reflecting their wider range of participants.⁵

Galileo thinks for a moment, his finger to his lips, then faces Newton.

Galileo: I see your reasoning, Newton, but might this scaling reflect bias? Consider this example: an Art student earns 47 out of 50 for practical folio, what is known as the Visual Language, but a moderate written exam result pulls the mark down to 29, then scaling drops it further to 25. Meanwhile, a student learning German receives a modest 30 score which becomes 38 after scaling, including up to 5 bonus marks from the government initiative.⁶

He raises a hand before Newton can interject.

Galileo: Also, a Mathematics student's skill is directly valued and examined without written analysis, yet a Visual Arts student needs written proficiency in English too, in the form of a written exam, which feels uneven. Being tested on two languages, such as English and visual language, should be rewarded rather than penalised. Imagine the added complexity of requiring a German language student to write an essay on a dialect of German, including the evolution of the language. Or similarly asking a student of Mathematics to elaborate on their processes and understanding of the significant mathematicians who have come before them, in writing. This is what we ask of Visual and Musical Arts students. Yet for this level of erudition, an extra hurdle for them to jump, we find the Arts students heavily penalised in comparison to the languages. It is like judging a dancer's ability by a written explanation of movement rather than by watching them dance. It seems to be a preoccupation that written examination results, used to moderate scores, are the central metric to Australia's unique assessment approach, distilling exam performance over all of a student's results, into a single rank. This may overlook diverse skills, such as visual, musical, or neurodivergent.

He addresses the auditorium directly.

Galileo: ADHD or dyslexic minds, for instance, often shine in visual tasks or creative leaps, as Dr Edward Hallowell notes, calling ADHD a trait of potential when channelled well.⁷ The (UK) Government Headquarters (GCHQ) actively recruits dyslexic thinkers⁸ and it's often rumoured that a large percentage of NASA employees are dyslexic, valued for superb problem-solving and excellent 3D spatial awareness. Many of the brightest students are classified as neurodivergent, with 20% of the cohort classified as ADHD, dyslexic, autistic or dysgraphic.⁹ Yet the ATAR's focus on speed and text can drive these potential excellent candidates away from higher education, as the toll on stress for a neurodivergent student can erode confidence and exacerbate mental health concerns. In contrast, the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) values creative skills and can see the benefit within this century.¹⁰ Does the ATAR system truly serve fairness, or are we asking fish to climb trees?

Roosevelt steps between the two men, smiling to take the edge off the heated discussion.

Roosevelt: You raise a thoughtful concern, Galileo, about diverse strengths. Newton, does this challenge the ATAR's fairness?

Newton takes a deep breath and returns to his chair, considering the argument.

Newton: I'd say fairness comes from consistent rules, not varied outcomes. Scaling seeks to reflect a subject's rigour, not to favour one skill. Students might choose subjects like languages, which scale well, to improve their rank. The ATAR's pattern includes higher scores drawing capable students, lifting standards, and this echoes successful economic models like businesses such as Amazon's, where efficiency builds success over time.

Galileo laughs.

Galileo: An intriguing comparison, Newton. Amazon's economic flywheel boosts efficiency at the expense of other metrics, leading to lower prices, which attract sales, generating ever more business.¹¹ Critics lament excessive waste,¹² decay of local businesses¹³ and the risk of centralised data breaches¹⁴. Perhaps the ATAR works similarly: students pursue high-scaling subjects, raising those subjects' value, which attracts more students the following year, shaping curricula and driving increasingly to an undervaluing of the arts. PISA calls for creativity and problem-solving in our era,¹⁵ yet schools are compelled to focus on the fact that students and parents chase higher scores. Visual-spatial learners, strong in patterns and deep thinking, may struggle with quick based tests, in turn, creating a lack of confidence or even a sense of failure. For neurodivergent students, like those with autism, ADHD or dyslexia, the pressure of timed, text-based exams can obscure brilliance, yet their skills in problem-solving and spatial thinking are prized, as seen in intelligence organisations such as GCHQ and NASA's claimed dyslexic workforce.¹⁶ Models like Bloom's and SOLO taxonomies highlight synthesis and creativity as the highest order thinking — qualities the arts cultivate well.¹⁷ I wonder if our current system reflects merit, or a narrower view?

Roosevelt looks up with a quizzical expression.

Roosevelt: A reflective point, Galileo. I think it is timely to add that we all can agree that Australia does already have an enviable education system, ranking highly internationally in both secondary and tertiary comparisons.¹⁸ So these concerns we discuss are focused on ensuring we remain innovative and inclusive to all, including any students who have previously been neglected. Newton, perhaps you might consider how the ATAR supports

skills for the future?

Newton leans back in his chair, hands steepled together.

Newton: Indeed Eleanor, our universities are rightly highly regarded and require in their prospective students a base of knowledge, which exams assess well. Creativity and problem-solving can grow later, in higher studies. Alternatives like grading ‘art portfolios’, while appealing, could be hard to standardise fairly. Art is subjective, so how do you arrive at an agreed method of result?

Galileo leaps forward, excitement evident in his stance.

Galileo: I hear you, Newton, though research suggests otherwise. A NASA backed study found 98% of five-year-olds show high creativity, yet only 2% of adults keep it, perhaps due to convergent thinking focused education systems.¹⁹ Our esteemed friend Albert Einstein mused, ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge’.²⁰ Art fosters visual-spatial skills and creative thinking, fuelling innovation. Today, graphic design is regarded as an integral aspect for presentations, videos and social media. Some research suggest visuals lift persuasion in presentations by 43% over words alone.²¹ Could we not reward this intelligence better in education?

Roosevelt turns to Galileo.

Roosevelt: A thoughtful point, though, is that the full extent of your critique?

Galileo smiles at Roosevelt, then winks at the audience, enjoying the momentum of the debate.

Galileo: Perhaps not, Eleanor. It’s almost as if the term ‘academic’ has shifted in meaning: once tied to philosophical inquiry, embracing diverse thought, it now seems to reflect efficient business modelling. It favors a numerical score like the ATAR over the pursuit of deeper questions and the expression of one’s soul. This change, rooted in Australia’s economic rationalism since the 1980s, leans toward rote efficiency rather than the creative innovation Schumpeter valued in a healthy capitalist system.²²

He pauses, his gaze sweeping over the auditorium, making eye contact with various individuals.

Galileo: Something more concerning to me, and I say this carefully, suppressing the arts and varied creative intelligences — where neurodivergent minds often flourish — may fuel youth distress. Brené Brown observes, ‘Unused creativity is not benign. It metastasizes. It turns into grief, rage, judgment, sorrow, shame.’²³ Engaging with art builds empathy, a vital skill.²⁴ I fear the ATAR’s focus risks dimming these human qualities.

Roosevelt joins Galileo at the front of the stage.

Roosevelt: A meaningful consideration, Galileo. What solutions do you envision?

Galileo: It is a profound question, as our economy and politics are deeply linked in the education of our next generation, but I will oblige. Firstly, perhaps we might better inform the public. The ATAR accentuates elite paths, not everyone’s journeys, and acknowledging this distinction might ease the pressure on schools to target score alone. Secondly, scaling might use a more neutral tool, like the General Achievement Test (GAT) developed in Victoria, as a moderating tool, rather than the current metric of predictable examinations, to lessen bias on

subject ranking.²⁵ A third possibility is introducing a dual ATAR that measures sequential and critical thinking separately, which could better suit varied fields of thinking.²⁶ Another idea is we could extend the five-mark language bonus to include visual language, music, and dance, which speak universally, as traditional, non-verbal languages.²⁷ This could foster creativity and resilience for a changing world, lifting all minds, including the neurodivergent. In fact, Professor Milligan at The University of Melbourne has recommended a new credential aimed at enhancing the students ability to thrive.²⁸ More generally, there are calls from university academics for improvements from high school graduates in the thinking skills of critical and creative thinking and the ability to navigate subjective perspectives, areas synonymous with Arts curricula, yet these calls go unheeded.²⁹

Newton interrupts, shaking his head.

Newton: These are ambitious thoughts, Galileo. Bonuses might be misused, and dual ATARs could complicate matters. Exams, though not perfect, work at scale. I wonder if the benefits outweigh the challenges.

Galileo turns back to face Newton.

Galileo: A fair concern, Newton. Yet progress often follows challenge. Like Leonardo, Einstein and others, I have seen art and science blend to reveal truth.³⁰ Valuing diverse minds that includes creative and neurodivergent, nurtures ingenuity. Eleanor, what are your thoughts?

Roosevelt moves between the two scholars, concluding with a smile.

Roosevelt: Your discussion sheds light on the ATAR's strengths and limits. Newton, your case for structure is sound. Our education systems are valued for their competitive spirit and rigour. Galileo, your call for fairness for all types of thinkers moves me. Reason suggests a middle path: explore reforms, adjust scaling, and embrace all talents. Let us continue this search for balance.

As the audience applauds, the three goliath thinkers take a bow.

Conclusion

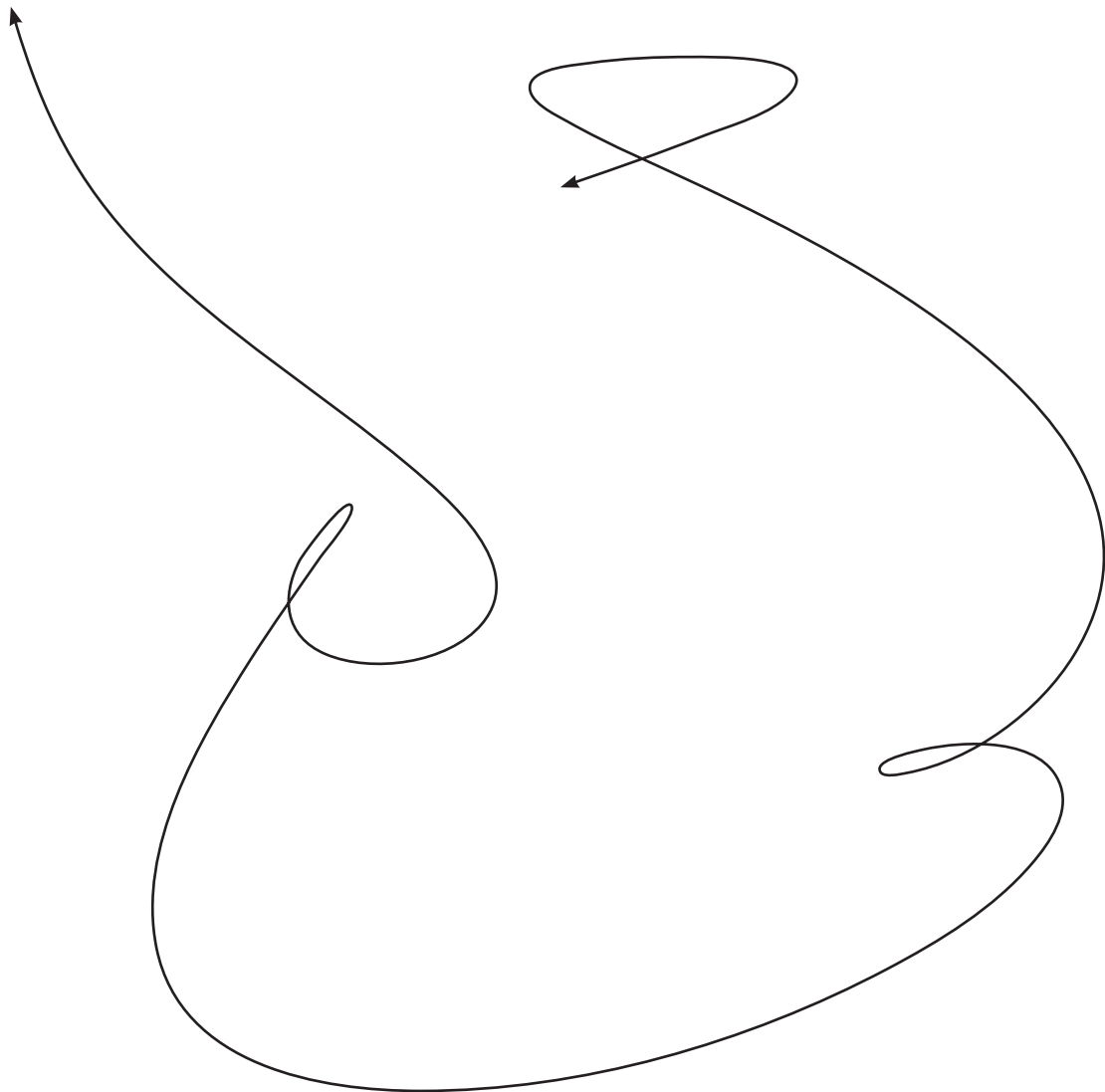
Through its fictional dialogue, this paper has examined the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) as both a pragmatic mechanism and a cultural force that shapes educational values. While the ATAR provides a consistent tool for selection into highly competitive pathways, its reliance on time-pressured, text-heavy assessment risks privileging certain modes of cognition while marginalising others. This marginalisation particularly disadvantages visual, creative, and neurodivergent ways of thinking. As Galileo argues, this self-reinforcing system may narrow curricular choice, diminish the arts, and obscure forms of intelligence increasingly vital in a visual, complex, and innovative world.³¹ Rather than rejecting structure outright, the dialogue calls for clearer public understanding of the ATAR's limitations and asks for measured reforms: more neutral scaling, recognition of non-verbal literacies, and pathways that value both sequential and critical depth. In seeking balance between efficiency and imagination, the essay echoes Roosevelt's mediation, suggesting that educational equity lies not in uniformity, but in a system capable of recognising diverse minds³² without dimming the playful spirit of learning.

Endnotes

1. Matter over Mind (2025) by Archie Usher is a representation of the papers' argument in visual form. In his

- artist statement, Usher explains that the painting ‘examines the systems we are born into-systems of labour,
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Prose poetic response

Jack Tan

Your dramatic dialogue on the ATAR and its manifold implications resonated deeply – I was schooled in Singapore. Assessment nation. Renowned for high stakes examinations, world-leading scores in Math + Science, meritocratic Education system

We are across seas of differences – Yet transculturally connected

The ATAR was instituted in 2009 – Year I arrived in Melbourne as a Singapore-born Malaysian-Chinese graduate student in English Literature and the Arts

You call this system ‘nuanced calibration’ – What about the nuances of art, creativity, play? Skills my Education thinks of as add-ons

You call exams ‘consistent standards’, measuring diligence in uniform ways – In my school, students are straightjacketed into Good or Poor. A’s or not A’s

Visual, musical, or neurodivergence are diverse giftings – They don’t fit into assessment moulds

The ATAR focuses on ‘speed and text’ – ‘Speed and accuracy!’: slogan repeated ad nauseam by my Math teacher

The ATAR focuses on ‘speed and text’ – my English teachers make us write argumentative essays: their structures can be scientifically pinned down

Newton declares, ‘Art is subjective, so how do you arrive at an agreed method of result?’ – You won’t want to, if you understand humans are subjective

‘Imagination is more important than knowledge’ – Nobel laureate, chemist and college alumna, Elizabeth Blackburn, says she daydreams up her ideas

‘Engaging with art builds empathy’ – To make art, we sense and listen, we sense and listen and converse, with people like us, with people not like us

I’m so glad you conclude with a middle path, a search for balance – I’m for the middle: being in-between frees us up to connect and care; connect and care and create

Brief statement

I have structured my response as a series of quotations/paraphrases from Scholes and Percy, followed by, after each em dash – my poetic autoethnography on my parallel ‘high-stakes assessment’ schooling background.