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Education Updates

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Schools Should Give Students Better Advice about VET – Grattan Report

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Priests will face criminal charges if they fail to report child abuse, even if it is disclosed during confession, under new legislation introduced into the Victorian Parliament this week. [Click here to read more...](#)

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Plan for Mental Health to Start with Primary Students

The Australian Minister for Health, [Mr Greg Hunt, says](#) that the government wants to provide the 'world's best' mental health system, 'stigma-free and focused on prevention, starting with children under 12'.

The Children's Mental Health Strategy is a major part of the Australian Government's newly announced [Long Term National Health Plan](#). It focuses on the mental wellbeing and health of children aged up to 12, and aims to improve the delivery of support in the areas of early childhood, parenting and early education.

Mr Hunt said that the strategy would be developed by an expert working group, co-chaired by 'two internationally recognised leaders in child mental health', Professor Frank Oberklaid and Professor Christel Middeldorp.

He said the government would continue to 'tackle stigma around mental illness and encourage people to seek help – and to seek it early'.

The CEO of the National Mental Health Commission, Ms Christine Morgan, will take on the newly established role of National Suicide Prevention Adviser. Her role will include driving a whole-of-government approach to changing cultures of stigma, and establishing a 'towards zero' suicide target.

- Children the focus for 'zero suicide'. Rob Harris, *Sunday Age*, 11 August 2019
- Much more to do on youth mental health. Editorial, *The Age*, 12 August 2019

Bring Back Prerequisites for University, says Chief Scientist

Chief Scientist Alan Finkel says that universities should reinstate prerequisites for certain courses, as students are dropping subjects, such as maths, to boost their Australian Tertiary Entrance Rank (ATAR).

[Dr Finkel told an audience of maths teachers in July](#) that the ATAR was:

originally designed to coexist alongside clear expectations and signals from universities about subject choice. Without these signals, the pressure to study subjects that are seen to maximise your ATAR score has increased.

He said that while achieving a higher ATAR score might help students get into a course, 'without a sound understanding of core content, students scrape through, or fail, or drop out'.

Dr Finkel called for leadership from universities, saying that they should provide clear indications about what subjects are required to do well in a given course, and 'reinstate the expectation of studying mathematics at intermediate or advanced levels', especially for courses such as physics and engineering.

The Age reported that Dr Finkel returned to his proposition at a gathering of government schools principals last week, saying that ATAR was not designed to be 'the sole driver of bragging rights for schools, or just getting through the threshold for universities that in many cases don't care what subject you did'.

The desire to maximise ATAR, he said, has become a 'very strong driver of subject choice'.

- Chief scientist lashes out at ATAR. Adam Carey, *The Age*, 13 August 2019

Schools Should Give Students Better Advice about VET – Grattan Report

A new [Grattan Institute report](#) says that some university students would be better off doing vocational education and training (VET), and that schools should be alerting them to the alternatives.

The author of the report, higher education program director at Grattan [Andrew Norton, says](#) this is especially true for male students with low Australian Tertiary Entrance Ranks (ATAR).

'Schools need to give them better career advice alerting them to these possibilities – and governments should end funding biases against vocational education', he said.

VET alternatives for women aren't as attractive, however.

'Engineering occupations are male-dominated, often deny women employment, and are inflexible in providing part-time work,' he said.

Mr Norton says that 'a few' VET courses would probably increase the employability and income of men with a low ATAR, but women with a low ATAR, would find that 'higher education is almost always their best option'.

The report's recommendations include that the National Careers Institute review current career advice practices in government and non-government schools, arguing that students 'should receive personalised advice'.

– Rewards of VET need to be better known. Andrew Norton, *The Australian*, 14 August 2019

New Laws to Remove Reporting Exemptions for Priests

Priests will face criminal charges if they fail to report child abuse, even if it is disclosed during confession, under new legislation introduced into the Victorian Parliament this week.

The Victorian Minister for Child Protection, Mr Luke Donnellan, said that the [Children Legislation Amendment Bill 2019](#) would add people in religious ministries to the list of the people who must report a 'reasonable belief of physical or sexual child abuse' to child protection authorities.

The Bill removes exemptions in current legislation related to the Seal of Confession, a Catholic Church stricture which forbids priests from revealing matters disclosed to them during reconciliation ceremonies.

[Victorian Attorney-General Jill Hennessy said](#) the new legislation, which responds to mandatory reporting recommendations in the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse's final report](#), delivered on a 2018 election commitment.

'We promised to put the safety of children ahead of the secrecy of the confession and that's exactly what we're doing,' she said.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia said last year that they could not accept the Royal Commission's recommendation relating to confession as it was 'contrary to our faith and inimical to religious liberty' (see [Weekly Briefing 25/2018](#)).

The Archbishop of Melbourne, [Peter Comensoli, confirmed his personal position on ABC Radio this week](#), saying that while he would encourage a person who confessed to abuse to tell the police, he would 'keep the seal' of confession.

- Melbourne Catholic Archbishop Peter Comensoli would choose jail over breaking confessional seal. *ABC News* (online), 14 August 2018
- The church is not above the law. Luke Beck, *The Age*, 16 August 2019