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Call to fix uni course maze

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EDUCATION REPORTER

A MAJOR overhaul of the university entrance system could be a key to reducing dropout rates of one in five students, a joint project by the state's three biggest universities has found.

The *What Should I Study* project, led by UniSA, investigated how Year 12s make their tertiary study choices.

The final report of the two-year project says scrapping Australia's "unique" and "overwhelming" preference system, that generates a single course offer to uni hopefuls, could help young people make better decisions.

The time and effort needed to steer students through the system could then be better spent on deeper exploration of suitable course options, it says.

In South Australia, Year 12s apply with a series of course preferences to the SA Tertiary Admissions Centre and receive one offer in the main January round, though they can hold out for a possible offer of a higher preference in later rounds.

Many students end up accepting an offer "because it is their only option", unlike the

North American system where they can receive multiple offers to different courses and institutions.

In the report, UniSA's Andrea Parks says the "significant element of speculation in the selection of the first preference" makes the process "both difficult and overwhelming for many students".

"It is particularly stressful for students when they don't yet know their final results or have a strong desire to enrol in a very competitive program. This may differ in other states but is fairly similar across Australia," Ms Parks says.

"Energy is expended by universities and secondary schools to adequately support Year 12s with their preference position. Students require alternate pathways and back-up plans in case you don't get a high enough ATAR (entrance rank). The prominence attached to a preference position can overshadow more important aspects of the study choice decision such as exploration and selection of a suitable study choice."

Ms Parks told *The Advertiser* the system also resulted in some young people accepting offers in "prestige" courses requiring high ATARs, when

they would be better suited to other courses.

The report suggests pushing back the "early closing date" for applications from September 30 to late December, so teens can "consider their (Year

12) results and submit a preference set based on an applicant's reality".

Currently, 60 per cent of SA applicants alter their preferences, in some cases 10 times or more, after September 30.

Other recommendations include scrapping the late fees for applications made after September 30, and replacing uni information sessions in schools with activity-based workshops so Year 12s examine choices more closely.

Unis and SATAC are considering the report.