

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GRADUATIONS

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*Melissa O'Meara looks at nurturing the learner psyche, strengthening family bonds, and shaping the affective domain in non-traditional learning environments...*

High school graduations are pivotal milestones in an individual's educational journey, wielding profound influence on the learner's psyche, family dynamics, and the affective learning domain. This impact is particularly pronounced in cases where the learning journey has been non-linear, involving unconventional paths and challenges. Additionally, the significance of high school graduations extends to non-traditional learning environments, such as high school equivalency programs, where the achievement of graduation holds even greater importance. I will explore the importance of high school graduations, with a specific focus on non-traditional learning environments, drawing connections between the learner psyche, family dynamics, and the affective domain.

High school graduation serves as a transformative event that significantly shapes the learner's psyche. In the context of a traditional learning journey, the achievement of this milestone represents the culmination of years of academic growth and personal development. Erikson's psychosocial theory (Cherry, 2023) highlights the importance of successfully navigating the developmental task of identity versus role confusion during the adolescent years, and high school graduation serves as a critical marker in this process.

For learners in non-traditional learning environments (such as TAFE NSW's high school equivalency programs), where the path to graduation may be non-linear, the psychological impact is even more pronounced. The learner's psyche becomes intricately connected to the process of overcoming challenges, showcasing resilience, and achieving academic success. This achievement not only validates the learner's intellectual capabilities but also instils a sense of pride and accomplishment that can positively shape their self-identity. Non-traditional learning environments, specifically TAFE NSW high school equivalency programs, cater to individuals whose educational journeys have often taken unconventional paths.

TAFE NSW, as the public provider, serves learners who face various challenges, such as academic setbacks, personal responsibilities, disability or the need for flexible learning options. A raft of research suggests that such disadvantage is often compounded by social structures of power further minimising an individual's ability to achieve in a mainstream learning environment. Therefore, high school graduations hold unique significance in the TAFE NSW environment, symbolising triumph over adversity and resilience in the face of challenge.

The attainment of high school graduation is not solely an individual triumph, but also a shared victory within the family unit. In traditional learning environments, families play a crucial role in supporting learners, and the celebration of high school graduation becomes a testament to the collective efforts and sacrifices made. In non-linear learning journeys, families often face additional challenges, and the achievement of graduation becomes an even more significant source of pride. Moreover, family dynamics are intimately tied to the affective domain. High school graduations, particularly in non-traditional learning environments, strengthen familial bonds by providing a shared sense of accomplishment. The affective domain within the family unit is enriched through the collective emotions of pride, joy, and resilience. The celebratory nature of graduation ceremonies fosters a positive emotional connection among family members, contributing to a supportive environment that recognises and values the learner's unique journey.

Graduations also have deep intergenerational impacts, shaping not only the graduate's life, but that of their family and subsequently their communities. According to Sahirah and Mohd (2024) educational attainment often sets a precedent for future generations. Further, they found that a student's academic performance was directly influenced by a mother's educational accomplishments, with following generations viewing this as

something attainable and tangible for themselves. It is not unreasonable to conclude then that this leads to the breaking of systemic access and equity issues and improves socio-economic status and opportunities for the family. It also benefits the communities in which they live, as graduates have higher levels of community engagement, are more likely to take on community leadership, mentorship and role modelling, thereby contributing to societal improvements as their credibility, due to having qualifications, lifts. There are further societal and generational effects, as education is linked to increased positive health outcomes, an increased ability to access healthcare and an increased capacity to adopt healthier lifestyles. This is in conjunction with a shift in social and cultural values due to an increase in critical thinking and the adoption of new principles that are aligned to diversity, inclusion and a challenge to community norms.

Research by Reed et al (2012) emphasises the importance of recognising the diverse needs of learners in non-traditional settings. High school equivalency programs, designed to provide an alternative pathway to graduation, acknowledge the complexities of learners' lives and offer tailored approaches to education. The achievement of graduation in these environments becomes a symbol of empowerment, demonstrating that individuals can successfully navigate non-linear paths and attain academic success despite challenges. In the TAFE environment, the affective domain plays a central role in the educational experience. High school equivalency programs often cater to adult learners, and the affective domain becomes a key factor in shaping their attitudes, motivations, and emotional connections to education. The achievement of high school graduation in these settings can have a profound impact on learners' perceptions of themselves and their lifelong educational journey.

Learners in high school equivalency programs often harbour a range of emotions, including anxiety, self-doubt (imposter syndrome), and a desire for self-improvement. If the current trends around school refusal and childhood and adolescent mental health continue, neurodiversity will be a huge driver of students to the TAFE NSW learning environment, as students fail to thrive in the mainstream ecosystem (evidence of an overworked, underfunded, and under-resourced learning environment and not a failure of teachers). Given this range of emotions,

and current learner trends, there is a clear link that graduation serves as a catalyst for positive emotional experiences, contributing to a more favourable attitude toward education and the creation of lifelong learners.

Moore and Anderson (2003) emphasise the importance of recognising and addressing the affective needs of learners to enhance educational outcomes and, thereby, meeting TAFE NSW's core value of creating lifelong learners. Graduations in non-traditional learning environments also influence learners' motivations. The accomplishment becomes a source of intrinsic motivation, inspiring individuals to pursue further educational and career goals. The affective domain, in this context, becomes a driving force behind continued learning and personal development.

High school graduations wield profound importance for learners, their families, and the affective domain, particularly in the context of non-traditional learning environments. The achievement of graduation shapes the learner's psyche, providing a sense of pride, persistence and resilience in the face of challenges. Family dynamics are enriched through shared victories, characterised by a supportive learning environment and are often symbolic of a student's first experience of educational success. Improvements within the affective domain, which is intrinsically connected to attitudes and motivations, foster a lifelong love for learning. Recognising the increased significance of high school graduations in non-traditional settings like TAFE NSW and a consistent approach to such - as opposed to shooting a student out of a funding system - is crucial for promoting inclusivity and acknowledging the diverse pathways individuals take to achieve educational success.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Melissa O'Meara is a teacher at TAFE NSW. Her specialities include neurodiversity and LLND. The youngest daughter of migrants, Melissa came to teaching late in life after finishing her first degree in 2018. Prior to this Melissa spent nearly 20 years as a qualified financial planner and bank manager.

Melissa is currently the Women's Contact for TAFE Teachers Association as well as a member of the Teacher Workload Committee. Melissa is proud to teach, learn and live on Ngambri, Ngunnawal and Gundungurra country. She predominately teaches on the high school equivalency programs at Goulburn TAFE Campus, as well as the occasional specialist program.

Melissa has been active in the NSW Teachers Federation since joining the teaching profession and credits her sanity to activism and the collegiately, compassion and collaboration that it brings to her teaching practice.

