

Universities Admissions Centre (UAC)

SUBMISSION

Response to improving retention,
completion and success in
higher education

Higher Educations Standards Panel
Discussion Paper

July 2017



Universities Admissions Centre

About us

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC) was established in 1995 and is the largest tertiary admissions centre in Australia. Owned by universities in NSW and the ACT, our mission is to provide excellence in admissions services and promote equity of access to tertiary education. Central to that mission is a strong culture of servicing the needs of all our stakeholders, in particular our institutions and applicants.

UAC has a trusted and valued position in the higher education sector. Applicants, in particular Year 12 students, turn to UAC for unbiased and authoritative information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface with which to apply. Institutions rely upon UAC services to handle the bulk of the admissions process, allowing them to focus on their core capabilities of learning and teaching, research and community engagement. Parents, schools, the media and the general public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

UAC is a member of the Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admission Centres (ACTAC), the group that facilitates communication and co-operation between tertiary admissions centres in Australia and New Zealand. UAC's Managing Director is the current Chair of ACTAC.

Executive summary

UAC supports the release of the Higher Education Standards Panel's Discussion Paper on Improving retention, completion and success in higher education, and considers it a natural successor to the important work of the Panel on Improving the transparency of higher education admissions.

While the data shown in the Discussion Paper clearly show that this is a complex area and there is no need for undue alarm regarding student attrition in Australia, UAC believes that it can continue to help improve student success in two critical areas:

1. Admission
2. Outreach.

1. Admission

Admission is our strength. We already use our expertise in admissions to help universities and other providers admit tens of thousands of students every year. We have a suite of over 200 schedules that assess qualifications at all levels from all over the world and put them on a common scale that accurately predicts success in the first year of university.

The most obvious example of UAC's expertise in this area is the calculation of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank - a numerical measure that ranks students according to their performance in their Year 12 qualification and translates it into a number that effectively predicts capacity for success at university. But there are hundreds of examples, and each of our schedules has been rigorously developed with extensive data and cohort analysis. We already make the link between the inputs (such as previous study) and the outputs (completion of degree) of tertiary study, and have the capacity to make further links with other inputs (such as different student attributes).

UAC is also able to assess non-academic criteria and is currently working with our universities to help them admit teaching students based on personal characteristics deemed necessary for success as a teacher. UAC would like to build on these capabilities in the non-academic criteria as these kinds of contextualised admissions become more important to government and the sector. UAC can and does help get the right types of students into the right courses.

Greater transparency of admissions will also help through the provision of consistent, comparable information which provides the framework for informed student choices. UAC has been very involved in the work of the Panel on improving transparency and looks forward to the outcomes of that work as embodied in the agreed implementation plan. Centralisation of this information will be critical to its success and UAC's role as a central body will prove invaluable to students looking to make objective comparisons between universities.

The use of data is also important to the transparency agenda. UAC has a wealth of data that could be utilised now and expanded in the future to make the link between admissions transparency and retention and student success, not just for current UAC institutions but nationally.

2. Outreach

UAC currently plays an important role in engaging with and providing information to prospective students, and is keen to expand our outreach work for the benefit of the sector and the community.

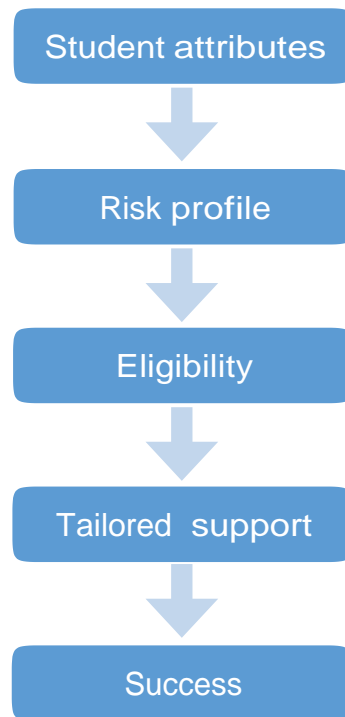
The Discussion Paper rightly acknowledges the importance of outreach to prospective students, and UAC has a vital outreach function in providing comprehensive, unbiased information about universities and course choices.

UAC is keen to extend our outreach services to prospective students to include more detailed career and study advice. UAC could in the future also service the needs of government and the sector for personalised follow-up with first year students before the census date and with those exiting higher education to help them explore their options and provide the critical data repository required to improve programs into the

future. While universities can individually offer these services, and may choose to do so as part of their individual engagement activities, UAC can do so on behalf of higher education more broadly.

As acknowledged, again data has an important role to play to help make effective interventions where support is needed. UAC has pre-enrolment data which could be linked to post-enrolment data to support the sector to make targeted interventions and improve retention.

In conclusion, a deep understanding of the success cycle of prospective students is key to these strategies. Diagrammatically it can be represented as:



Prospective students come with many attributes, in relation to their personal background and circumstances, their qualifications and how they plan to study. From these a risk profile emerges, in much the same way as a car insurer will calculate risk based on your age, gender, type of car and what you plan to do with it. That risk profile can be used to determine eligibility for university courses and the level and type of tailored support that students will require. If these things are done well it will lead to improved student success.

UAC can use its expertise to collect student attributes, calculate risk and from that determine eligibility, while universities can focus on the quality of teaching and learning and on tailoring their individual support programs.

Selection is paramount to what UAC does and we continue to be well placed to help the sector in a wide variety of selection and admission processes.

UAC's response to questions

On the following pages of this submission UAC provides specific feedback on the questions outlined in the Discussion Paper.

UAC thanks the Higher Education Standards Panel for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper and looks forward to working with the Panel, the Department of Education and Training and the higher education sector in whatever capacity those stakeholders determine to deliver greater success in higher education.

Question 1

What should be the sector's expectations of completion rates (or speed of completion)?

UAC has no response to this question.

Question 2

What changes to data collection are necessary to enhance transparency and accountability in relation to student retention, completion and success?

UAC is very keen to provide a centralised repository for data relating to student success, so that the vital links can be made with student attributes and admission data.

Question 3

How could Government websites, such as QILT and Study Assist, be improved to assist students to make the right choices? For instance, how could student success, completions, retention and attrition data be made more accessible? Would a predictor for prospective students, such as a completions calculator, be useful and where would it best be situated?

The proposed national admissions information platform will help students make the right choices by providing consistent and comparable information about admission requirements. Over time this could include data around completions. In the meantime it would be helpful if this information was available for students where they would most likely find it – be it QILT or Study Assist. The data needs to be in graphical form with each provider identified and with benchmarks/averages for comparison. A completions calculator may be useful for students, but perhaps even more valuable to institutions to develop appropriate support strategies as outlined.

Question 4

Can we enhance the tracking of students in tertiary education including movements between higher and vocational education (perhaps by linking the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support number and the VET Sector Unique Student identifier)?

Yes, there are opportunities to better track the movement of students and this would give a more complete and nuanced picture of student movement. The ideal solution is a unique national student identifier from the very first year of formal schooling that stays with the student throughout all levels of education.

Question 5

What strategies would further strengthen outreach and careers advice to assist students making decisions about higher education?

As outlined above, UAC can provide real value to the sector and the community in this area by providing comprehensive, unbiased career and course advice, and providing follow-up and support services to first year students and those exiting higher education.

Question 6

What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?

Identification starts with the admissions process, which is where UAC can add value. As noted above, UAC can develop a risk profile based on student attributes (including personal details and study history) which would allow universities to identify students who will most likely need intervention and support during their studies. It is then for universities to determine how best to develop, implement and promote those interventions and support services.

Question 7

What more could be done to encourage institutions to offer intermediate qualifications? Should universities or NUHEPs recognise partial completion of a degree through the award of a diploma, perhaps by using “nested” degree courses? How much impact would there be on institutions who chose to offer such courses?

UAC has no specific response to this question, but acknowledges the importance of established pathways to the completion of a degree, especially for those most at risk of attrition.

Question 8

What new and innovative approaches do evaluations suggest are improving student completion at individual higher education providers?

UAC has no response to this question.

Question 9

What can we learn about enhancing student success from the international perspective?

While UAC has no specific answer to this question, it is interesting to note that other countries are using learning analytics, effectively matching students and study programs and monitoring students with “at risk” profiles – all areas that UAC is willing to engage with the sector to address.

Question 10

What are the most effective ways for providers to share best practice?

As a centralised body, UAC is ideally placed to facilitate communication between institutions to share ideas and best practice for the benefit of the sector and community more broadly, and is happy to offer that service.

Question 11

How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?

UAC has no response to this question.

Question 12

*What strategies should TEQSA employ to ensure compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework which requires higher education providers to offer the level of support necessary to ensure student success?
Does TEQSA require further powers in this regard?*

UAC has no response to this question.