



Australian Government  
Department of Education and Training

# Improving the transparency of higher education admissions

Australian Government response to the report of  
the Higher Education Standards Panel

## Australian Government response to the report of the Higher Education Standards Panel

The Government welcomes the Higher Education Standards Panel's report on how the admissions policies and processes of higher education providers can be made clearer, easier to access and more useful, to inform the choices and decisions of prospective students and their families.

Over recent years, the variety of pathways through which a prospective student can apply or be accepted into higher education has increased significantly. This has widened the opportunities for students to pursue their higher education ambitions, but that increased diversity of entry pathways has come at a price. The Panel found that prospective students, their families and schools are finding it increasingly difficult to understand the full range of study options and opportunities available, and how they can best take advantage of these options to meet their education and career objectives.

The Panel's recommendations provide a comprehensive and well thought out framework to address this growing complexity. Implementation of the Panel's recommendations will help to ensure that prospective students and their families have the information they need, in a readily accessible and comparable format, to help students match their interests and ambitions to their abilities and needs.

The response to the report from key stakeholders has been very positive, with a high level of goodwill expressed regarding both the Panel's recommendations and the desire of stakeholders to be part of the solution. In response to the extra focus on this issue during 2016 some providers have already enhanced the information available on their websites about student offers and enrolments. Much more needs to be done, however, to deliver sector-wide improvements and a more nationally-consistent approach, and to simplify and make clearer the information that all prospective students need to help them select the right course and provider to best meet their needs and goals.

The Department of Education and Training will work with the higher education sector to develop a joint implementation plan to give effect to the Panel's recommendations. An implementation working group, chaired by a senior representative of the higher education sector, will be established to develop the joint implementation plan. The Government will invite representatives from key organisations to join the working group including:

- Universities Australia (UA)
- private higher education providers
- the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
- tertiary admission centres, and
- a student voice.

The working group will identify the steps necessary to implement the Panel's recommendations as quickly as possible, either through voluntary adoption across the sector, additional regulation, or requirements linked to funding agreements, where necessary. The aim is to implement as many of the recommendations as possible in time for the 2018 academic year.

A detailed response to each recommendation is set out below.

## Recommendations and response

### **Recommendation 1**

*The following six principles should be adopted to facilitate transparency of higher education admissions policies:*

- *A student-centred approach is critical to the provision of information about admissions*
- *Higher education providers exercise autonomy over their admissions policies, consistent with the requirements set out in the Higher Education Standards Framework 2015*
- *Access to clear information relating to admissions requirements and various entry pathways are to be made available to all applicants equally*
- *Any new arrangements are to be applied equally to all higher education providers, universities and non-university higher education providers alike*
- *Higher education providers are to be held accountable for public claims against their stated admission policies*
- *Reforms to improve the transparency of higher education admissions policies and to ensure compliance are designed to minimise regulatory red-tape.*

### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

These principles are an important guide to the implementation of the Panel's recommendations. Many stakeholders have already endorsed the principles. The Government welcomes this and encourages higher education providers, their representative bodies and tertiary admission centres to take these principles as a guide to the actions needed to improve transparency for prospective students and their families. The Government notes that the autonomy accorded to higher education providers requires the maintenance of high standards, appropriate accountability and broad community support.

### **Recommendation 2**

*The purpose of standardising the manner in which higher education providers present their admissions processes should be to:*

- *Make information on admissions policies available in a comparable format so that individuals can make better informed choices about providers and courses of study*
- *Clarify the requirements of the revised Higher Education Standards Framework with respect to transparency of admissions policies, and ensure that higher education providers know what they must do to meet fully those requirements*
- *Reduce uncertainty among students and their teachers about what is required in order to be admitted to higher education, especially where admission is on the basis of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) achieved*

- *Give each higher education provider the capacity to promote a strong sense of its educational ethos and how admissions policies seek to contribute to that mission*
- *Ensure higher education providers can be held accountable for the information they publish on their admissions policies.*

### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

This purpose statement outlines the outcomes expected from the successful implementation of the Panel's recommendations. In combination with the principles at Recommendation 1, this purpose statement provides a strong foundation for clearer, more accessible and – importantly – more comparable information to inform higher education choices.

### **Recommendation 3**

*Common language around admissions processes should be adopted by all higher education providers.*

### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The use of common language to describe similar processes and concepts is critical – both to ensure the comparability of information published by different providers, and in different jurisdictions, and to reduce confusion about what is being described. An example of this is the use of the ATAR-related terms such as “cut-off” and “clearly-in” in different jurisdictions – with different terminology being used to describe the same thing, and creating perceptions of difference where none exists.

The Government has asked the working group to identify the wide range of common admissions-related concepts, transactions and terms that would benefit from consistent language; to agree the definitions and contexts in which those terms will be used; and the steps necessary to ensure the consistent adoption of that common language across the entire higher education sector.

### **Recommendation 4**

*For each course, the provider should publish information that clearly identifies the basis for determining admission to the course, including whether admission is on the basis of ATAR or an alternative pathway.*

### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

This identifies a critical aspect of improved information about entry requirements that should be readily accessible to prospective students to support decision-making about which course and provider to choose. For each available admission pathway to a course, the precise assessment used to determine entry should be explained, including whether ATAR is or can be a factor, what other factors if any are taken into account, and how those are assessed.

Failure to publish complete information may deter prospective students from applying despite having a realistic chance of acceptance and success in their preferred course of study. In many cases institutions may be able to consider a range of factors besides ATAR or mature age special entry tests – e.g. past employment, examples of previous writing, academic and employer references or other material. Where these options exist, this information should be readily available to prospective students.

The adoption of the proposed information templates (Recommendations 8-9) for use on providers' own websites is the minimum action necessary to meet this recommendation. While the Government expects that the sector will respond to the recommendations in the Panel report and work towards this outcome, for this critical action, the Government will also consider requiring the adoption of the information templates as a condition of access to Government funding and student loans.

### **Recommendation 5**

*Where admission to a course is determined in whole or part on the basis of an individual's ATAR, the provider should publish information that clearly identifies the minimum ATAR admission requirements for the course and the provider's bonus points arrangements. ATAR acceptance outcomes or thresholds should be reported at the completion of all offer rounds.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

For students who rely on their ATAR as a factor in gaining entry to a course or institution, it is critical to have access to the full range of information on how ATAR is used in assessing eligibility including the minimum ATAR they need to attain for entry and the impact of any bonus point schemes they may be able to access.

Ensuring the believability of ATAR-related information is critical to restoring confidence in the use and equity of ATAR as an admission criterion. All published ATAR-related thresholds – such as the minimum ATAR admitted in the previous year – must reflect the outcome at the end of all rounds of offers of places in course. Currently the definitions of these thresholds reflect the situation at the end of the main round of offers only. Many applicants with lower ATARs are admitted in second or subsequent offer rounds. This limits both the usefulness of the information and the credibility of stated entry requirements across the higher education sector.

### **Recommendation 6**

*Tertiary admission centres should work together to develop consistent language and reporting around admissions processes, and to streamline cross-jurisdictional application processes.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The Government expects that the tertiary admission centres will work towards a nationally consistent approach by sharing and adopting good practice across jurisdictions. This will assist all students to navigate the process of entry to higher education, particularly students looking to apply interstate who currently face multiple applications and application fees. Streamlining these processes will enhance student mobility.

Drawing on the work done in relation to Recommendation 4, the five tertiary admission centres will need to adopt common terms and definitions. Reporting of application, offer and enrolment data should be more consistent, aiming for the highest quality common approach. More efficient, easily accessed and lower cost processes for students considering study at an interstate institution will need to be developed and adopted.

The working group will also be asked to consider whether the implementation of the Panel's recommendations would be better achieved through the current arrangement of separate tertiary admission centres in different jurisdictions, or through a more consolidated national approach.

### **Recommendation 7**

*A national higher education admissions information platform should be established to provide a single point of entry for information about higher education admissions policies and processes across all registered providers.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The Department of Education and Training will work with stakeholders in the higher education sector, including the tertiary admission centres, and State and Territory governments to develop a new information platform (e.g. a website) that will provide a useful first point of contact for prospective students seeking information on higher education courses and providers.

A user-centric approach to design of the information to be presented will ensure the scope of this work makes it easier for prospective students and their families to access or be directed to the information they need to help make decisions about courses and providers before considering making an application.

### **Recommendation 8**

*A template should be adopted by higher education providers to publish institution level information in a standardised format about their admissions processes, which would be made available to prospective students on the national higher education admissions information platform.*

### **Recommendation 9**

*A template should be adopted for higher education providers to publish study area information in a standardised format about their admissions processes, which would be available to prospective students on the national higher education admissions information platform.*

## **Response**

The Government accepts these recommendations.

The Panel noted an “overwhelming sense of the need for action” to improve the comparability of information available from higher education providers. The information templates proposed by the Panel draw on information currently published by the New South Wales Universities Admission Centre (Recommendation 8) and stakeholder proposals from Universities Australia and the Council of Private Higher Education (Recommendation 9).

The Government considers the adoption of a template approach is critical to ensure consistency and comparability of the range of information available about admission requirements and basic data about past year admissions. The working group will consult with stakeholders to refine and agree the details of templates for the presentation of institution-wide and course-specific (or field of study) admission requirements and comparative data.

It is not intended that adoption of a template approach will reduce the ability of providers to differentiate their offerings, or respond to a diverse range of student and educational needs. It is intended that those students should be able to make informed decisions about the best study options to suit their specific needs and capacities using information that is comparable and provides a minimum standard level of information about admission, course and institution requirements, and past performance. It is further intended that the enhanced transparency that more comparable information provides will also raise levels of institutional accountability.

## **Recommendation 10**

*The national higher education admissions information platform should be designed to enable direct comparison of information on admissions requirements and data on previous years' admission outcomes.*

## **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The lack of comparability in currently available information was a key concern that the Panel has sought to address through its recommendations. Delivering this comparability will be critical to the success of the national admissions information platform.

As with the QILT website, the new national admissions website will need to include the capability to select a number of different courses or providers (depending on the type of information being compared) and display direct comparison of key information types – e.g. ATAR and other entry requirements, available admission pathways, student cohort information including data on the basis of admission for recent enrolments.

### **Recommendation 11**

*TEQSA should have an active role in monitoring compliance with guidance to the sector on transparency in higher education admissions, complementing the regular cycle of assessing applications for provider re-registration.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

Once implementation arrangements have been jointly agreed with the sector through the implementation working group, the Government will determine what role TEQSA will play to monitor engagement by higher education providers with the Panel's recommendations, and how it will report on the sector's response. This will include some form of baseline audit of sector compliance with the admissions transparency requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework and monitoring of how the response to the Panel's recommendations takes effect. The Government expects the spirit and intent of these recommendations to be embodied in the implementation plan and will ensure TEQSA is provided with necessary powers for effective compliance.

### **Recommendation 12**

*TEQSA should draft a Guidance Note to providers, canvassing best practice in providing clear information on admissions processes.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

TEQSA will develop written guidance on the types of evidence it expects to see to demonstrate compliance with the admissions transparency elements of the Higher Education Standards Framework. The guidance will need to take account of work done with stakeholders to develop an implementation plan to respond to the Panel's recommendations.

This guidance, once in place, will form the basis for TEQSA's monitoring of the response by the sector to the Panel's recommendations and its progress reporting to government and the public.

### **Recommendation 13**

*There should be an online guide to explain higher education admissions information and how to use the national higher education admissions information platform more effectively.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

Adequate support to school students, their parents, schools, teachers and career advisers to use the new national admissions information platform will be critical to its success.



As the national admissions information platform is developed, the Department of Education and Training, in consultation with stakeholders, will develop appropriate online supporting materials to assist prospective students, their families, schools, teachers and career educators make the most of the new resources and functionality developed.

### **Recommendation 14**

*Further consideration should be given to assessing the factors and approaches that contribute to student success, completion and attrition rates in higher education.*

#### **Response**

The Government accepts this recommendation.

The Minister for Education and Training has asked the Panel to undertake work in 2017 to identify:

- the trends and factors driving completions and attrition
- the adequacy of existing data on completions and attrition and improvements that can enhance transparency and institutional accountability
- strategies institutions can pursue to support student success and course completion in higher education, and
- ways in which the identification of students at risk of non-completion and the adoption of evidence-based support strategies to maximise their opportunity to succeed, can be systematically embedded in provider practice.

Enrolment is only the first step in the journey to qualification and productive employment. If we wish to maximise the economic benefits of public investment in higher education, the Government and the public also need to be assured that everything possible is being done to ensure students have the best chance of successfully completing their enrolled units, courses and qualifications.

The Panel is well placed to investigate and provide advice on this issue.