

Submission No 1

Personal Submission to

HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS PANEL

Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

Before retiring recently, this author served as DVC (Academic) for many years at a Melbourne based university and was responsible for selection into all undergraduate programs for nine years from 2001 to 2009. During that time, VTAC commendably continued to improve their rules for student selection which increasingly limited the potential for some universities to 'game' the system to maximise their published entry scores. Nevertheless, there remains scope to improve the selection process to achieve more equitable outcomes for all. Whilst the ATAR is not a perfect instrument for gauging potential university success, and additional factors can be useful for student selection, the ATAR is the only sensible common metric against which entry standards can be judged. This submission will address some of the questions posed by the panel, as numbered below, followed by a more detailed discussion of the problems with and means to improve the ATAR cutoff.

1. Based on your experience, what is the most important information needed to help potential higher education students determine which course to study and which institution to apply for?

Only the following information is necessary. Other information is very subjective, variable and available elsewhere for more meaningful inter-institutional comparisons.

- a. The previous year's ATAR cutoff and median for year-12 school leaver applicants (see my discussion on ATAR cutoffs at the end of this submission).
- b. The number of target places to be offered across each of the various broad categories of applicants and the actual number enrolled in the previous year:
 - i. Year-12 school leavers
 - ii. VET pathways, including specific inter-institutional pathway details
 - iii. Applicants who have completed HE studies
 - iv. Other (mature age, disadvantaged and other targeted equity groups, etc.)
- c. The application of bonus points to address social equity issues and additional specific entry requirements
- d. Professional accreditation of a program where relevant
- e. Possible career pathways where these are not very obvious

2. Is knowledge about how the ATAR rankings are calculated and published 'cutoff' thresholds a significant influencing factor on course and institution preferences? How could this information be made more accessible and useful?

See my discussion on ATAR cutoffs at the end of this submission.

3. Is there sufficient information about how 'bonus points' are awarded and used to adjust 'raw' ATARs sufficiently understood? Should the application of bonus points be more consistent across different institutions? Is the current variety of different bonus point rules appropriate to meet the needs of individual students and institutions?

Bonus points can be useful in very limited circumstances, but potentially can also be used to manipulate entry standards. As such, they really need to be controlled at a national level to

ensure consistency and equity.

4. Is there sufficient knowledge of the range of alternative admissions procedures employed by higher education institutions? • Examples could include 'early' offers on the basis of previous year's cutoff or school recommendations.

Alternative admission procedures that are well publicised, transparent and equitably applied allow for institutional flexibility in a competitive market. However, as discussed further below, such procedures must be subject to the same conditions of transparently contributing to the published ATAR cutoff in the case of year-12 applicants. For example, if an early offer is made, the actual ATAR achieved by that student must contribute to determination of the published cutoff for that program, regardless of the anticipated ATAR on which the offer was made.

5. Should there be an annual report of the proportion of students accepted into courses by each higher education institution on the basis of their ATARs and/or what the median ATARs was for each course?

See my discussion on ATAR cutoffs at the end of this submission.

6. Do the current state based Tertiary Admissions Centre arrangements adequately cope with students' desire for mobility to institutions across state borders? Would a more national approach to managing applications across borders be beneficial?

The states will always expect that their intrastate universities will service the needs of their intrastate population. Almost uniquely in Australia, at least for now, the vast majority of applicants will only ever apply to their intrastate universities. Interstate university applications will inevitably grow since Australian universities increasingly compete for students in their product offerings at an international level.

A single, national level TAC would be far more cost effective and allow for a uniform and more equitable national approach, which is now possible with a national ATAR. Online default settings for any student would be to their intrastate universities, but the system could easily allow them to explore interstate options if they wish. Such a single TAC might also provide a common basis for international student selection, to address the vastly different entry standards for international and domestic students.

An intermediate solution would be to provide a single online portal that seamlessly provided access to the various state based TACs.

7. Is there an understanding of how such mechanisms as early offers, second round offers and forced offers affect the transparency of higher education entry? How, if at all, should these factors be dealt with for the purposes of transparency?

See my discussion on ATAR cutoffs at the end of this submission.

8. What information or enhancements do you think should be added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website?

The Panel could task TEQSA to explore the possibility of creating a metric that recognises the value add provided by institutions that value good teaching, where that metric reflects the likelihood of lower ATAR applicants successfully completing a degree program.

Improving the Published ATAR CutOff

All universities, quite understandably, seek to maximise their perceived prestige at national and international levels. Prestige is achieved by three interrelated factors:

1. Research quality and achievements.
2. Entry standards that lead to high graduate standards
3. Historical factors such as campus quality, institutional wealth, etc. and trends of (1) and (2)

Of these factors, entry standards is where universities are most vulnerable as this requires constant attention and is publically immediately apparent. A prestigious university's reputation could be devastated if its entry standards plummeted. Conversely, this is where an aspiring university has the best possibility to improve its reputation. Entry standards in Australian universities are currently indicated by the published ATAR cutoffs for all the programs offered by those universities.

In past decades, selection processes were somewhat loose such that entry standards could be easily manipulated. With the advent of centralised online computer selection in the 1990's through state based Tertiary Admissions Centres, these processes have been progressively tightened up. Nevertheless, there remains plenty of scope for local program selection officers to 'game' the system to artificially and deceptively elevate their published ATAR cutoffs to the point where such cutoffs can misinform year-12 applicants as to their real prospects for selection.

So.... published entry scores for programs clearly serve two different purposes:

1. Informing prospective students of their likelihood of acceptance
2. Informing all stakeholders as the general entry standards of a program and the institute

Now consider just a couple of examples of how the current ATAR cutoffs could be gamed by program selection officers.

1. A desired ATAR cutoff is set and fixed. If insufficient year-12 applicants meet this requirement, then the program is filled with non year-12 applicants (there are usually large numbers of such applicants). When the number of offers to year-12 applicants is in the minority, the published cutoff becomes meaningless as an indicator of entry standards, and potentially creates some serious equity issues between the different application cohorts (e.g. a dropout from another HE program or a VET student that has been competency assessed may be selected over a high ATAR year-12 applicant).

2. Year-12 applicants whose ATARs are less than the target cutoff are made second or third round offers (or informal or early offers) and therefore may be outside consideration of how the published ATAR cutoff is determined. Again, this simply means the published cutoff can become meaningless.

It is therefore proposed that for every program, two ATAR related figures are published:

- 1. The lowest ATAR of any year-12 applicant offered a place into that program (regardless of whether they take up the offer or not, and regardless of which selection process was used to make such an offer). This cutoff reflects the minimum entry standard to a program**

It is unfortunate that many people may inevitably judge a program by this lowest entry point, but I cannot see any alternative as a means of informing subsequent applicants of their real prospects.

2. A median ATAR of all year-12 offers should concurrently be published to better reflect the general entry standard of that program.

This is a possible answer to address real entry standards, as compared to the minimum entry cutoffs.

Consider two simple examples that illustrate the utility of these proposals.

1. Compare two programs that have identical median ATARs, but one has a lower cutoff: these programs would reasonably be said to have the same entry standard. The lower cutoff may simply be an artefact of the computer selection process (it happens and can lead to defensive selection behaviour that could disadvantage students!).

2. Compare two programs that have identical cutoffs, but one has a significantly higher median ATAR. This enables an applicant to make a more informed choice between what would otherwise be two seemingly identical programs.

Furthermore, it is proposed that:

1. University programs should be required to designate specific publishable target numbers for the various categories of applicants (covered in Question 1 response above) , including year-12 school leavers.

This would provide a much more transparent selection process. Pre-set ATAR cutoffs should be forbidden. Previous year cutoffs would then be a reliable guide to prospective year-12 students, since applicant selection patterns do not generally radically change from year to year.

Pathways VET students would also have a more reliable guide (at present they have no guide whatsoever, except in the few cases of agreed articulation arrangements).

2. All year-12 offers, regardless of which round or selection process they are made in, must contribute to the published clearly in cutoff for this to be a genuine and transparent reflection of minimum entry standards.

A Problem in calculating the ATAR with contributing VET Studies

A serious anomaly in the calculation of the ATAR that applies in Victoria, and may well apply in other states, is the overvaluation of prior or concurrent VET studies in contributing to a year-12 student's overall score and hence their ATAR ranking. For example, a TAFE Certificate III program, which this author knows for a fact can take a weekend to complete for a capable year11 student, is incredulously deemed the equivalent of two year-12 VCE subjects, even when competency based. This, and other similar anomalies and inequities, should be investigated and eradicated by the Panel.

Recommendation:

Any and all completed VET studies are deemed the equivalent of no more than one Year-12 subject if used in the calculation of a year-12 student's ATAR.