



Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

Murdoch University

Executive Summary

Universities have a responsibility to ensure that the options for student admission are transparent, clearly expressed and consistently applied.

At Murdoch University, we believe that every student with the potential to benefit from the education we offer should be able to access a pathway to Higher Education, regardless of their background. To that end, we have developed a series of entry pathways, each targeted clearly at students with different levels of educational preparedness. The outcome from each pathway is benchmarked at the same level, so all students entering a degree program do so with a comparable level of preparedness.

As noted in the HESP consultation paper, a relatively low proportion of students enter university direct from high school with an ATAR. This makes the landscape complex, and an exclusive focus on ATAR would be a mistake.

Whilst transparency is critical, it is the responsibility of individual institutions to ensure that their own requirements and pathways are appropriately communicated. We believe that this requirement is adequately captured by the revised Higher Education Standards¹ and would not support any further or more detailed regulation or the development of a single information source.

Consultation Questions

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? Please feel free to rank the different types of information in order of importance.

The primary motivating factor for potential higher education applicants is interest in the course of study. Course content is therefore the most important information. An interesting course *plus* good employment outcomes is the ideal combination. Meaningful and timely information on graduate employment is thus also a core information requirement.

By offering a suite of well-defined entry pathways, Murdoch University is able to give all students a line of sight to their qualification goal. It's our job to help them identify the right pathway given their starting point, and thereby ensure they have every chance of success. In other words, we care more about where they are going than where they have come from.

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

Course of study is the primary focus for students. Universities therefore need to ensure that admission options are transparent and clearly expressed. Information on cut off scores, bonus schemes, and other modifiers of ATAR should be available to students as part of the information provided to ensure students understand their pathway to entry.

The calculation of ATARs themselves is totally opaque. Notionally a ranking relative to a student's cohort upon completion of their secondary education, it utilises opaque statistical modelling to compare students with a theoretical body of people who might be qualified to receive an ATAR in that year. As such, increased transparency of cut-off scores and scaling mechanisms will not change the fundamental lack of transparency of ATAR.

ATAR is a selection rank. As such it is not a valid basis for university entry in a system where places are uncapped. Where places are not rationed, a ranking is an inappropriate way to select students for university entry.

Murdoch University cares about what students know and can do, and their academic potential, not where they fall on the bell curve of their putative age cohort.

The core of transparency of admissions would be fundamentally addressed by moving from a norm referenced basis of admission (ATAR) to one that is criterion-referenced and that establishes a direct link between the marks students see themselves achieving in their exams and the basis on which institutions admit them.

¹ Provider Registration Standards, 6.3; Provider Course Accreditation Standards, 3.1

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?

The rationale for applying bonuses, such as the RISE bonus at Murdoch University, lies in the well-established fact that students from Low SES backgrounds attending their local school will tend to perform less well in terms of qualification outcome than their peers from wealthier backgrounds in high achieving schools. Bonuses are therefore about levelling the playing field, not privileging one group over another.

A nationally agreed bonus by which institutions need to correct the playing-field, based on empirical data, would be valuable. As currently stands, most universities seem to settle on bonuses within a tight band.

While national agreement on the quantum of bonuses would provide useful consistency, it is critical that institutions are able to apply bonuses according to the needs of their student cohorts and institutional priorities.

4. Is there sufficient knowledge of the range of alternative admissions procedures employed by higher education institutions?

Murdoch University has worked hard to establish a very clear and coherent suite of entry pathways which cater for students from a range of educational backgrounds, and which vary in requirements to a benchmarked set of outcomes. All are designed to ensure that students commence their degree with an equivalent chance of success. We can always do more to communicate the options to students but believe that this is the University's responsibility, both from an ethical perspective and in terms of the Higher Education Standards.

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?

As acknowledged in the Consultation Paper, admissions is about far more than ATAR. There are also complexities in pathways for students with an ATAR, for example some students who generate an ATAR have a different basis of admission such as a portfolio or enabling program (OnTrack Sprint at Murdoch).

Accordingly, an annual report of the type described would be meaningless.

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?

There is some flexibility in the state-based TACs for students to apply across state borders, although it necessitates multiple applications and additional cost to students. The current TAC model in WA is underwritten by institutional resources, leading to financial inefficiencies for individual institutions.

Taking into account these financial impositions, Murdoch University would support opening discussion about the development of a national TAC.

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?

In WA the TAC, TISC, manages these mechanisms very clearly and transparently.

The University of Notre Dame (UNDA), however, does not utilise TISC and doesn't subscribe to the guidelines. This introduces confusion for students as UNDA makes early offers well in advance of the public universities.

Establishment of standards and protocols to which all accredited institutions were required to sign up would help address this. These could be administered by a national TAC.

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

No additional information is required on the QILT website.

There remain significant issues around Field of Education in the identification of courses linked to specific employment/jobs. For example majors in 'Asian Studies' or 'Security Terrorism and Counterterrorism' are allocated to *Society & Culture (Not elsewhere classified)*.

9. How best should comparable information on student admissions procedures be made available to the public? What is the most appropriate and effective way to communicate information to students? What information or enhancements do you think should be added to Tertiary Admission Centre websites, university and non-university institution websites, and/or Australian Government websites such as QILT and Study Assist?

It is the view of Murdoch University that the differences in entry requirements within and between institutions would make a national or even state based comparison of all potential entry pathways cumbersome and difficult to ensure clear navigability.

In addition, given the primacy of course in student considerations the issues identified above in relation to aligning careers, courses and FoE would adversely affect comparisons.

10. What special measures are needed to ensure equity of access for disadvantaged students?

Institutions need to build relationships with High Schools, and primary schools, in areas facing social, economic or educational disadvantage to develop creative and site-specific initiatives to support to promote aspirations and pathways for higher education and learning.

The Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) has facilitated active engagement with the processes required to gain entry to university for disadvantaged students.