

TRANSPARENCY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS PROCESSES

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY SUBMISSION

MAY 2016



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**VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY**

MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY DETAILS

Name of organisation	VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
Postal address	PO Box 14428 MELBOURNE VIC 8001
Legal status	OTHER INCORPORATED ENTITY established under the Victoria University Act 2010 of Ballarat Road Footscray VIC 3011
Australian Business Number (ABN)	83 776 954 731
Key contact person and contact details	Professor Kerri-Lee Krause Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost Phone: (03) 9919 5466 Email: kerri-lee.krause@vu.edu.au

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Victoria University thanks the following staff who contributed to the preparation of this response:

NAME (listed alphabetically)	POSITION	DEPARTMENT
Mr Steve Berridge	Vice-President	Victoria University International
Professor Helen Borland	Dean	Graduate Research Centre
Professor Pat Drake	Professor of Education	STEM Education Strategic Initiatives
Professor Terrence Hallahan	Director, Teaching and Learning	College of Business
Ms Barbara Lawrence	Interim Deputy Academic Registrar	Student Services
Dr Karen Lawrence	Director, Teaching and Learning	College of Health and Biomedicine
Professor Nicolette Lee	Executive Director	Learning and Teaching
Professor Ian Solomonides	Pro Vice-Chancellor	Learning Innovation and Quality
Ms Teresa Tjia*	Registrar	Student Services and Quality Information and Planning
Professor Hans Westerbeek	Dean	College of Sport and Exercise Science
Ms Susan Young*	Dean of Students	Centre for Student Success

* Academic Board Member



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1. ABOUT VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Victoria University (VU) was founded in 1916 as Footscray Technical School. After successive mergers with TAFE colleges across Melbourne's western suburbs, Victoria University of Technology was established in 1990, and renamed Victoria University in 2005.

Today, VU is one of the largest and most culturally diverse education institutions in Australia, and one of only five multi-sector universities offering vocational education (TAFE) and higher education courses.

Victoria University now has more than 48,000 enrolled students, which includes more than 13,400 international students studying courses onshore or with our partner institutions offshore. More than 2,400 academics, teaching and professional staff join with the University's students to make VU a great university of the 21st century.

As the University of Opportunity and Success, we will be open and excellent, creating exceptional value for any student from any background, while uplifting the communities in which we operate.

We will achieve this vision by:

Education - Providing high quality, engaging career-based tertiary education at all levels of vocational and higher education with flexible entry and exit points, appropriate pathways, engaging and rigorous curriculum and contemporary delivery; while maintaining rigorous standards and ensuring that all students are supported to meet those standards.

Research and Engagement - Undertaking high quality and innovative applied and translational research which results in healthier, smarter and sustainable communities in the West of Melbourne and beyond, while connecting deeply with industry and the community, and in turn enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Victoria University (VU) is pleased to take up this opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes.

VU has a strong position on quality and standards and remains committed to clear and transparent admissions policy and procedures. VU recognises the critical nature of high quality student and course advice which is available prior to admission, early, and throughout a student's enrolment as a key element for first-year retention and successful course completion.

Acknowledging the critical importance of accounting for a range of background factors that may impact on a student's preparedness to engage successfully with higher education, the ATAR remains important for reasons of efficiency and because it has currency within the wider community.

Improved transparency in higher education admissions has important implications for students in terms of career and course choices, as they will benefit from access to accurate and comparable information from the universities they are considering, and in terms of equity where all aspects of selection for admission are clearly evident.

This report provides the Department of Education and Training with a University-wide response coordinated through the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost.

As part of the internal consultation process, members of the University's Academic Board¹ (consisting of 36 members) and the University's Senior Leadership Group (consisting of 33 members) were invited to consult with colleagues and to comment, within the scope of their role, on the transparency of higher education student admissions policies and procedures.

3. INTRODUCTION

Early in April 2016 Senator the Honourable Simon Birmingham (Minister for Education and Training) asked the Higher Education Standards Panel to advise him on options to improve the transparency of higher education student admissions policies, while minimising regulatory impact. The Minister intends to improve the accessibility and comparability of information about the diversity of course entry pathways by ensuring greater transparency of admissions processes and standards. The Minister has asked the Panel for advice on what more needs to be done.²

The Panel has sought advice from institutions by calling for feedback and responses to 11 questions. Following are Victoria University's responses.

¹ <https://www.vu.edu.au/about-us/administration-governance/academic-board/academic-board-membership>

² Source: [Higher Education Standards Panel – Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes](#)

4. 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.**

Victoria University data suggests that career outcomes and university reputation are the most important factors prospective students consider when making decisions about applying to University. Students are most concerned with questions about:

- whether the course will lead to a specific job
- whether it can provide the building blocks to a career
- industry recognition, as an important factor for employment prospects.

Accreditation and registration for professional careers such as nursing and teaching are important further allied considerations. Other specific factors include entry pathways, transfer routes, opportunities for recognition of prior learning and further study prospects.

Prospective students take into account perceived academic and cultural fit and opportunities offered through the wider university experience.

Other factors which prospective students take into consideration to a lesser degree, include:

- salary potential
- course duration, academic expectations
- location
- cost
- quality of experience (including teaching, collegiate, facilities and administration).

For VU's international students, the key information is generally: university location, overall institutional standing (public university with a global ranking), course information (duration, professional accreditations, employment outcomes etc), tuition fees and admissions requirements.



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?

ATAR rankings and published 'cut-off' thresholds have become a proxy for status and the reputation of courses and institutions. The ATAR as a ranking tool is not well understood by parents, students and even some academic staff. Outside of the Group of Eight universities, a high ATAR 'cut-off' can be considered unattractive. Conversely, if the ATAR score is deemed too low then the course is often seen to be of poor quality. There is also an expectation that for courses delivered from regional centres the ATAR score would be lower than the same course offered by that institution in a metropolitan setting, suggesting that an ATAR 'cut-off' figure reflects demand rather than quality or the availability of places.

ATAR 'cut-offs' are indicative rather than authentic entry levels. 'Cut-offs' may hold firm with flagship and high demand courses, but the majority are fluid and may be significantly lower than those stated. The ATAR does not provide full insight into prospective students' academic potential and further information and processes are needed to address potential and equity in student selection and admission.

The ATAR is further complicated through subject weighting for example in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and language subjects. Further, this weighting process is not transparent or easily understood.

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 allocation of bonus points is an important factor in university autonomy and it is particularly important for an institution such as Victoria University with its commitment to widening participation across a range of student equity groups.

Bonus points and the impact these have on raw ATAR scores is not well understood. The system of calculating and applying bonus points is complex and makes the process of applying for university entrance especially difficult for many prospective students, and equity is at stake. There is, therefore, scope for considering ways to communicate more effectively regarding the way in which bonus points are calculated and applied.

Bonus points are applied variously in response to specific targets. For example, in some instances bonus points are applied for students attending particular secondary schools. In other instances, geographic location provides the opportunity for bonus points to be allocated.

Universities need autonomy in determining how best to apply bonus points within the context of their distinctive mission and student cohort. The application of bonus points should be consistent with the institution's admissions policy, transparent and, in the absence of reasons to the contrary, consistent across academic departments within the institution. A clear articulation of how bonus points are used within individual institutions would be beneficial to potential applicants' understanding.

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

Whilst the ATAR is efficient, it does not account for the bulk of applications for university entrance. The present alternative admissions procedures across the sector are not well understood by prospective students, parents and the wider community. Importantly, there is insufficient time for applicants to pursue various alternative admission procedures at different provider institutions, often only fully engaging with one institution.

As a university committed to student opportunity and success, VU endorses the principle that institutions continue to have autonomy over admissions processes, in line with their specific mission. Along with several other universities, VU has a long-standing commitment to supporting learning opportunities for students within their local communities. In each case, admissions policies will vary accordingly, so the approach to setting and monitoring entry standards and underpinning principles must continue to allow for these differences.

VU's international students gain admission through a variety of channels, including internal and external credit pathways and through direct application.

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 ATAR was for each course?

An annual report of the kind outlined in question five has some merit, however there would be considerable value in augmenting such a report to reflect the broader information that helps to add transparency to the admissions process. A report that reflects only ATAR-based admissions would simply provide a snapshot of those who have entered via the ATAR pathway and does not provide a whole of cohort analysis.

While it is vital that the sector has visibility on the basis of admissions and numbers across all entry processes, it is not clear how a report based on ATAR entry alone and designed for public use, would provide a transparent picture given the various other admissions mechanisms used.

If an annual report were to be contemplated, there would be merit in including additional information such as the proportion of students accepted into courses by other means, such as pathways or direct applications.



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 significant variance in the level of service the Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) provide to applicants and to provider institutions to warrant consideration of a national approach. Picking the best and providing a national TAC would have benefit, and mobility could definitely be improved. There would be merit, for example, in considering the approach taken in Western Australia where students are provided with information about admissions eligibility across a range of institutions.

Before considering a national approach, there would be merit in considering the rationale for such a decision. Arguably, the small number of students who apply across state borders would not warrant such an overhaul and any focus on developing a national system may take resources away from improving transparency within the current system. Nonetheless, there may be a 'middle ground' option where best practices from the various TACs (e.g. the Western Australian example cited above) are considered for broader implementation across the sector.

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?

The information on early, second round and forced offers tends to be specialist knowledge held by school counsellors, university admissions staff and some academics. It is very limited within the wider community and difficult to access for prospective students.

This question highlights the critical need for strong collaboration between universities and schools. Career counsellors in schools need reliable, comparable and accurate information from universities with which to assist students in the decision-making process.

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

Whilst current information is adequate, additional details regarding other quality indicators such as student success and capabilities, foci of courses and capacity to move between courses, would be beneficial.

The inclusion of trend data for individual institutions may be helpful so that prospective students can see how universities have performed over time. While there are statistical reasons for aggregating data across multiple years for some surveys, there is no indication of trend performance. It also would be useful to have state and national averages on the site to provide context.

Information about scholarships and leadership opportunities for students during their undergraduate studies would be of value.



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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?

Different TACs describe the ATAR in different ways. Some refer to 'cut-offs', others 'clearly-in'. A more common language around ATAR would be of benefit to prospective students.

The term 'cut off' implies 'no one below is considered', whereas terminology such as 'clearly-in' is perhaps a better descriptor in that it is only a threshold and applicants below this are still considered once other factors are taken into account. Addressing this would be beneficial. Currently applicants can apply with any TAC, but some basic concepts around selection seem to be described differently.

To increase transparency, promotion through schools is essential. Public media campaigns at specific times of the year using common language and linked directly to individual universities are also important.

Looking at overseas models for publishing comparable institutional data may be one step, within a context of learning from any emergent issues. Given the differing nature of institutions in Australia referenced above, the measures would have to be relevant to all. Any measures also need to be evidence-based and focussed on potential for learning success.

In terms of international students, stronger communication on the equivalence between international student admissions and domestic provision is important. Incorrect perceptions that institutions admit non-ATAR international students on lower admissions standards than applied to domestic students persist.

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

Clearer processes outlined in a common language for alternative entry and clear statements about the provision of support at institutional levels would benefit prospective students experiencing disadvantage.

Defining disadvantage and attributing levels of assistance is a complex matter requiring consideration of social disadvantage such as SES/rural/urban/Indigeneity, dis/ability and learning needs. The availability of support facilities/programs for students experiencing disadvantage should be explicitly listed and publicised by each institution.



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11. Can you suggest any other changes that would improve public awareness and understanding of tertiary admissions processes?

In addition to the efforts of individual institutions, providing sector-wide information at the state and national-levels is a useful way to raise public awareness in an ongoing way. The use of the QILT website is one approach. Other opportunities for institutions to collaborate, particularly at the state level also, should be considered. Increasingly, there is a need to promulgate tertiary admissions information to stakeholders beyond the school sector as we enrol increasing numbers of mature age students into higher education. Consideration should be given to state and national level initiatives in this regard, including for example, engaging with industry to share relevant information, together with the use of key community centres such as Centrelink. The keys to success include full transparency in admissions processes, using a common language across institutions and the need for universities, schools, industry and key community groups to work collaboratively.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Victoria University thanks the Higher Education Standards Panel for the opportunity to provide feedback and responses on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes and looks forward to receiving advice on the outcome of this consultation process.