



Australian Secondary Principals Association

Submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel - Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

Submission Date: 27th May 2016

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The Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) is a professional body that represents the interests of principals, deputy principals and assistant principals from government secondary schools across Australia. ASPA works with the profession to shape a paradigm of leadership and learning in order to create a better, preferred future for all students in Australia's government secondary schools. We are committed to ensuring that high quality government secondary education is provided to young people no matter what their geographic, social or personal circumstances.

We are not convinced that the Higher Education Standards Framework has the important policy influence on admissions transparency that it should. As stated in the consultation paper - *"The current (2011) Standards set broad requirements for information that should be made available to prospective students. However, they provide little guidance on how detailed or transparent the information available to prospective students about course entry requirements must be"*. This must be addressed so that students can make informed choices.

We support the new (2015) Higher Education Standards, which include several principles that address the issue of transparency of admissions policies and a stronger focus on student experience from pre-admission through to qualification and prospective employment. It is clear however that there **needs to be greater discussion on why young adults choose particular pathways**.

The consultation paper makes an important point, which must be the basis of any action:

"The provision of higher education is increasingly competitive. If students are to be able to make informed choices, however, they need to have easy access to comparable data on what individual institutions offer. It is crucial to their decision making that they are given a clear understanding of how universities and non-university providers select students, and what educational support they offer".

We agree with the proposed principles to improve transparency and these form the basis of our submission.

Proposed principles

From its initial consideration of admissions transparency matters, the Panel has identified ten principles that should underpin its advice and any initiatives to improve transparency in admissions policies and practices:

1. A student-centred approach to transparency should be central to any solution.
2. All students, no matter what their backgrounds, should have the same knowledge of how admissions arrangements work.
3. The broad autonomy of institutions over their admissions policies should be accepted, providing that these policies are compliant with the Higher Education Standards.
4. The revised Higher Education Standards, which will take effect from 1 January 2017, should provide the operating framework: they contain clearly articulated requirements in relation to admissions transparency, the provision of information for prospective students, and the quality of learning environments.
5. Any new requirements or changes should apply equally to all higher education institutions, universities and non-university higher education institutions alike.
6. Consistently presented and comparable information on all entry pathways and requirements should be available for each institution by discipline or by course.
7. A guide to admissions policies and student enrolments should be made available through a single online platform for ease of access.
8. Universities Australia and other higher education peak bodies should publicly support clarity on how ATARs scores are used and the manner in which alternative admissions pathways and policies are applied.
9. It should be made clear that ATAR thresholds do not operate as a strict 'cut-off'; that thresholds generally apply to (bonus point) adjusted ATARs; and that prior year ATAR thresholds are provided only as a guide to prospective students.
10. Higher education institutions should be held accountable for public claims against their stated entry policies.

In framing our response we sent a survey to members asking them to respond to the questions outlined; this submission is based on a compilation of those responses.

“While I appreciate that the focus of the Higher Education Standards Panel is on the transparency of higher education student admissions policies, so many of my students do not believe that university is within their grasp. The perception is that university is for those who can afford it. They need to know that a tertiary education is attainable and how it can be managed financially”. (Survey response)

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.
 - Examples could include information about course prerequisites, ATAR cut-offs, other non-ATAR-related entry options or requirements, possible career pathways and qualification requirements, institution reputation, campus facilities, course cost, student peer cohort characteristics, family history or other connections to a particular institution, accreditation of a course by a professional body or association, graduate employment and earnings outcomes, student reviews or surveys of teaching quality, recommendations from friends or family.

Course prerequisites; ATAR cut-offs, possible career pathways and graduate employment opportunities rated the highest amongst respondents.

Students need to know:

- Selection criteria into specific courses,
- Course prerequisites,
- The affordability (cost) of courses,
- Possible career pathways,
- Employment prospects post course,
- Opportunities the course will open up,
- The type of student that has been successful in specific courses,
- Other (essential) non-academic skills necessary to ensure success,
- Access to various scholarships,
- How to access accommodation near university (rural students),
- Which ATAR (other) subjects will enhance their opportunities of success in the degree course they choose to study,
- The value in a broad platform of subjects given that many of them will change direction once they get into university,
- Specialty areas of relevant institutions,
- What industry links are available - internships and hands on experiences etc. and
- When career counselling / university visits / open days are held – these should be early in Year 12.

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?

77% of respondents agreed that knowledge about how the ATAR rankings are calculated and published and 'cut-off' thresholds are significant factors influencing course and institution preferences.

This information should be made freely accessible through a national website and directly to schools.

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?

61% of respondents indicated that there is NOT sufficient information about how 'bonus points' are awarded and used to adjust 'raw' ATARs to ensure it is sufficiently understood.

87% of respondents thought that there should be consistent application of bonus points across all institutions. It is generally agreed that the different bonus point rules are generally focused on meeting the needs of the institutions and not necessarily the student.

Even though there are explanations on university websites there is overwhelming agreement that the language needs to be better aligned with the audience (students, parents etc.)

"The language used is confusing - it needs to be simplified and more widely advertised" (Survey response)

Other Responses:

- Simplify the process and the communication.
- Start the conversation with students earlier - Year 10.
- Greater clarity is necessary because students are often advised by counsellors to engage in programs to optimise later choices. The processing of raw marks is explained but this can often see students engaging in courses in which they are unable to achieve success.
- Provide schools with more specific information.
- State-by-State information sheets?
- More information to school from individual tertiary institutions.
- Consideration for needs of country students.

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 cut-off or school recommendations.

There is no clear agreement in this area with 52% of respondents indicating that there is NOT sufficient information and 48% indicating that there is sufficient information. This seems to be dependent upon the type of school and the relationship that school has with certain universities. This is an area where transparency is questioned.

Respondents suggested the need for more accountability in relation to government funding for bridging / enabling pathways to tertiary institutions and the publication of the success rates / drop out rates of students who enter tertiary courses via these pathways.

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?

87% of respondents said that there should 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.

The growing concern is that with less reliance on ATAR for university entry able students may choose non-ATAR pathways effectively “dumbing down” school offerings.

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 no clear agreement with 55% of respondents believe that the current state-based Tertiary Admissions Centre arrangements adequately cope with students’ desire for mobility to institutions across state borders.

70% of respondents believe that a more national approach to managing applications across borders would be beneficial.

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?

77% of respondents are concerned about the understanding of how such mechanisms as early offers, second round offers and forced offers affect the transparency of higher education entry.

We have found that a lot of the last minute work by schools to take advantage of 'special offer entry processes' is impacting the final weeks of the Year 12 study - more transparency early in the application process would alleviate this issue. (Survey response)

In dealing with the issue of transparency the following points were highlighted:

- Same process should apply for all institutions.
- A downloadable handout (in kid speak language) should be provided to students about what happens once they receive their ATAR score.
- More information to schools so that they are better informed when assisting students.

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

There was not a great deal of knowledge about this website so awareness raising is essential. Since de-facto ranking of schools is done through My School; one respondent suggested that ranking teaching quality within each institution and then within the different departments should be considered.

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?

Tertiary institutions must be open and accountable. There needs to be a national approach to this issue – whilst information is available through individual institutions it is difficult to compare information. A consistent data set of information from all institutions should be made available in one location.

- As students are digital natives, the information or details of where to access the information should be made available directly to all year 10, 11 and 12 students.
- The publishing of Annual Reports for use by school counselors and the media (similar to school performance data) was suggested by a number of respondents.
- University visits to schools were also seen as important.
- Better use of social media including YouTube, text etc. to communicate with students and parents was seen as essential.

It was generally acknowledged that Tertiary Admission Centre websites, university and non-university institution websites, and / or Australian Government websites should:

- Present consistent information – as suggested in this paper.
- Outline clearly the range of tertiary entrance opportunities.
- Be more interactive and more teenage friendly.
- Outline clear detail on entry methods, graduation rates and drop out rates etc.
- Direct users to support options.

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

One of the benefits of our current system is that it is not “one size fits all”. This has its advantages but it lacks transparency. Schools are generally very good at identifying and working with disadvantaged students.

This raises two important aspects - equity of access to information and equity of access to university courses.

We cannot assume that all students have equal access to technology but it is essential that all students be able to access the same information easily. To ensure this multiple approaches will be necessary social media, websites, school visits, information to schools for distribution etc.

To ensure access for disadvantaged students into university courses the following have been recommended:

- Part scholarships in the senior years to assist with tertiary entrance.
- Support and mentoring in the first few years of university
- Continued support for initiatives such as Curtin AHEAD and for the universities to maintain strategies such as UWA Broadway, Murdoch Rise and Curtin Step Up. It makes a difference!
- Transparent adjustments to entry requirements made according to disability or disadvantage. In particular, students with a disability need to have a mentor at the university. These students drop out because they cannot cope but this could be alleviated if they have a support person for the first year.
- Financial support for country students.
- Assistance with on campus accommodation.
- A deliberate policy of 'minimum' % of students (with disability or from a disadvantaged background) to be admitted each year.

Opportunities should be widely advertised, the application process should be simple and students should be actively encouraged to apply.

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

More detail needs to be published on the various methods of entry to institutions and the success rates of the students taking the different methods in their study programs. The drop out rates and graduation rates of students on the different entry methods should be available to prospective students. (Survey response)

- Nationally consistent and clear guidelines are seen as essential.
- Communication with key stakeholders is important – this means adjusting to the way they communicate.
- Consultation with the students (as the consumers) is essential.

Concluding Comments:

There is considerable scope for and a necessary discussion at all levels about the impact or affect this may have on education pathways for students in Australia. It raises specific questions around the purpose of secondary education and transparency around admission criteria may challenge the traditional ATAR based curriculum in many schools.

For students in secondary schools, learning is ongoing and context specific. ASPA questions whether tertiary education is geared for the future that our leaders are articulating.