

The Higher Education Standards Panel Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

Response from the University of Tasmania, May 2016

The University of Tasmania recognises the need for Australia's tertiary system to improve the transparency of higher education student admissions policies, processes and standards and so welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel.

The University is in a unique position within the Australian higher education sector being the sole university within Tasmania and is working closely with the State Government (under its Partnership Management Agreement) to collaboratively increase learning outcomes and grow employability opportunities for Tasmanians and to a broader base through its student body.

The University is also unique in relation to our interstate counterparts, in that we are our own state based admission centre. In some respects this gives the University some advantages over interstate institutions and our comments to the Panel's specific questions below are tempered as such.

- 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?*

In our experience applicants are interested in information around general entry requirements, and not just the ATAR cut off scores. Other frequent queries relate to prerequisites for particular courses, career planning queries and the professional accreditation status of various University of Tasmania courses.

In many ways ATAR cut-offs are the most easily understood of all selection criteria and the national system provides a good basis for cross-jurisdictional comparison.

There are more complex issues relating to entry based on prior higher education experience, VET qualifications and work and professional experience. Whilst use of a GPA for ranking those with prior higher education experience is common, there are quite different approaches between institutions and courses. Some use most recent year GPA, others use full course GPA and some take account of the relatedness of the qualification – all of which might be justifiable in particular circumstances.

There are similar issues in relation to VET qualifications. The ranking of work and professional experience can be quite a subjective judgement and is less easily described and assessed. The distribution of bases of admission in the chart in the consultation paper highlights the variety and complexity of the selection process. One of the biggest issues in the selection process is how universities compare rankings between categories. How does an ATAR of 70 rank against a GPA of 4.5 or a VET advanced diploma?

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?*

This issue is of more relevance to quota courses. Applicants are interested if their ATAR score will be enough to enable them to study at UTAS and how they may be ranked against applicants in a particular cohort for a course.

In our experience applicants are generally aware of the ATAR required for their preferred institution and course. As indicated above, ATAR rankings are only part of the issue for applicants and in any event, they are only broadly indicative of likely success in the selection process.

Selection of applicants is dependent on cross-category rankings of applicants and the particular cohort mix in any one year. If there is an increased applicant pool with high GPAs, there may be fewer places for applicants with mid-range ATARs or VET qualifications. The previous year ATAR cut-off is a reasonably good indicator but there are often more applicants in other categories and it is much more difficult to give reliable indicative information to those cohorts. Whilst the selection criteria can be very clear, selection is highly dependent on the quality and mix of applicants across all categories and this can be quite variable from year to year.

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 dissemination of information regarding bonus points varies. High schools provide students with information about the schemes available in addition to the information publicised on the University's website. Changes to any of these schemes are relayed to the Department of Education to allow for sufficient lead time so students are not disadvantaged in subject choices.

Currently the University of Tasmania offers bonus points based on socio-economic status, and is considering the reintroduction of the Language other than English (LOTE) bonus points.

Whilst bonus points may help with supporting the entry of disadvantaged students, there is very little consistency in the administration and application of bonus points. There are also significant difficulties in applying these mechanisms or even in determining low socioeconomic status in a fair and consistent manner. Bonus points also advantage some high socioeconomic status students who are more likely to have the opportunity to study languages or specific disciplines during their school years.

Bonus points applied differently between jurisdictions also reduce the capacity to deal with student mobility in a consistent manner.

The major problem with bonus points systems, if they are intended to support disadvantaged students, is that many disadvantaged students do not have the aspiration or opportunity to gain an ATAR anyway and many of these students come to university through VET and other pathways.

Mechanisms for dealing with entry of disadvantaged students across all categories are best handled by individual universities taking account of their mission and community demographics.

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

This is an area where the University of Tasmania is looking to continually improve by ensuring that there is enough information about the range of alternative/concessional entry pathways available and that potential students can readily access information about them.

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?

The University of Tasmania would support this approach. The current practice is for the proportion of students accepted into courses on the basis of their ATAR to be reported to the Commonwealth in the Course of Study file. This report does not include the median ATAR for each course.

This approach needs to be appropriately qualified and needs to take careful account of other considerations relating to selection as many courses do not simply use the raw ATAR. Medicine courses for example often rank on UMAT. Visual and performing arts courses take account of auditions and portfolios, some courses also use interviews or other assessments of competency, and the use of bonus points and other adjustments means that the raw ATAR is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the admission ranking.

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 University of Tasmania would agree that the current approach is satisfactory for student mobility.

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 University of Tasmania would agree that there is reasonable transparency in the admission process at present but there could be further improvement. However, one of the key issues, as indicated above, is that no matter how clear the selection criteria, decisions about final offers are highly dependent of the quality and mix of the applicant cohort and it is very difficult to give applicants clear advice about the likelihood of success.

One of the significant problems in the community understanding of the selection mechanisms is the media reporting of ATAR entry scores. In a system where the aim is to have 40% of the 25-39 age cohort completing a bachelor degree, all students with an ATAR of 60 (ie in the top 40% of their age cohort) should be eligible for entry to a bachelor degree. Given that not every student in this range applies for university entry, it follows that students below these levels are considered suitable for a range of courses, especially where other factors such as bonus points are taken into account. Often the reporting on these issues discourages potential students from applying and there needs to be a more balanced public debate on the wider range of considerations that are taken into account in the selection process. Many potential students do not even approach universities to test their likely eligibility because of the broader public perceptions about university entry.

It is also clear from a range of research that ATARs are not necessarily a strong predictor of success at university. There is not a strong correlation between an ATAR (especially below 90) and actual performance during a degree; many students on relatively low ATARs do succeed. It is just difficult to pick who will succeed based simply on an ATAR.

There should perhaps be more detailed reporting of student success rates across all ATAR ranges to emphasise that, for example, students in the 50-60 range do succeed but perhaps at a slightly lower rate on average than students in the 70-80 range. Students need to understand that they can succeed but also need to be made aware of the support available and the effort required. A public debate needs to acknowledge all of these nuances. As already indicated, these issues are perhaps more complex for students entering through non-ATAR categories – although these get very little media attention, and comparisons are much more difficult to make.

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

A limitation of the site is that only six institutions can be selected for comparison at any one time. There also doesn't seem to be a way to directly export and save the tables and charts into a Word document for example.

In terms of the data, at the moment you can compare individual institutions. It would also be useful for prospective students to be able to compare an individual institution(s) with the national average.

Any information should address the broad range of applicants for university entry and not just focus on ATARs. There should be clear explanations of some of the key concepts in assessment and selection of applicants including recognition that entry also depends on the quality of the applicant cohort.

There should be a focus on student success across a range of categories including VET, previous higher education, mature age and special entry for disadvantaged students rather than just looking at ATARs. There needs to be more discussion

about how to effectively categorise and rank and report on non-ATAR applicants. This needs to be done as only 31% of applicants are admitted on the basis of an ATAR and there is very little information on a significant majority of university entrants and their performance.

The name of the QILT website may indicate that it is aimed only at tertiary institutions rather than students or prospective tertiary applicants.

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?

Comparable information presented to students on admission procedures should be easy to access, and provide comprehensive information with consistent terminology, particularly as it relates to key information relating to bonus points schemes, timing of offer rounds etc.

To enable this, agreed guidelines for the presentation of key admissions procedure information could be used by all tertiary institution websites, government websites, QILT and Study Assist etc.

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

The University of Tasmania has a unique relationship to the State and shares responsibility for lifting educational attainment of Tasmanians. The University is deeply committed to ensuring that as many Tasmanians as possible are able to acquire the knowledge and qualifications they need for the jobs of today and the future. In fulfilling this mission of supporting greater educational attainment for Tasmanians the University targets students from non-traditional cohorts including regional areas, mature age entrance, low socio-economic or first-in-family backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The University offers a suite of Non-Traditional Award Programs and Associate Degree programs that enable Tasmanians to access study options. The University ensures that these cohorts are supported through pre-degree and in-degree learning and support that is targeted and culturally appropriate.

One measure which works against encouraging access for disadvantaged students is the current cap on pre-degree funded places. The University is advocating the removal of enrolment caps from funded associate degree places. This current barrier is particularly pertinent to the Tasmanian educational attainment agenda, given the limited number of pre-degree places that are funded and the University's low SES cohort and potential catchment areas. In order to lift the State's post compulsory educational attainment levels to at least the national average, Tasmania's need is for non-traditional students to attempt university study and as such it is important that students are able to do so without incurring additional financial burden.

Removal or variation of the pre-degree cap would result in a greater number of Commonwealth Supported Places for students at the sub-bachelor level and would enable the University to offer a range of Associate Degrees targeted at students currently not attending, or attracted to university.

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

From the University of Tasmania perspective, this is a difficult question to answer as we are the only state based tertiary centre. We appreciate and are committed to increasing public awareness of admissions processes and aim to do this through school engagement, marketing and recruitment campaigns and our own website. The visibility and accessibility of the QILT and Study Assist websites is also essential to raising public awareness. These sites allow students, parents and teachers to access information on tertiary institutions and their admissions processes easily.