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Dear Professor Shergold AC

Consultation paper: Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

The University of Queensland (UQ) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel in response to its consultation paper *Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes*.

In providing these comments, we would like to draw a clear distinction between the issues of (a) the use and calculation of ATARs for tertiary admissions and (b) the calculation and reporting of cut-off scores for admission to tertiary study.

- a) At its core, the ATAR is simply a measure of academic performance in secondary school (specifically Year 12) which is then turned into a rank. In Queensland, there is currently no mechanism to calculate an ATAR from Queensland Certificate of Education¹ results; an overall position (OP) score is calculated instead. This is similar to the ATAR in that it is calculated from an aggregation of senior secondary subject results. In Queensland, the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority is responsible for calculating the OP and publishes detailed information on its website outlining the methodology for this calculation. Aggregate scores such as the OP or the ATAR are calculated using complex statistical methods that include scaling in order to ensure that the score or rank is sound and fair. However, this does mean that these scores can be difficult to understand. We believe that previous academic performance at school is the most suitable measure by which to select school leavers for university level studies and we are concerned by the growing trend towards selecting school leavers for university on the basis of other qualifications (e.g. VET certificates) because this could be perceived to undermine the importance of academic Year 12 studies. However, we recognise that other sources of information can provide supplementary evidence of academic preparedness (e.g. music auditions, the completion of high level mathematics or a language other than English) or can identify educational disadvantage and where it is appropriate to adjust admission scores accordingly (e.g. through access schemes that apply bonus points).
- b) Cut-off scores are designed to represent the minimum unadjusted score required for entry into a course. That is, the minimum score (ATAR/OP) required by an applicant who has not received any bonuses/supplementary considerations. We acknowledge that, as a consequence of the demand driven system, supplementary evidence and bonus points are

¹ Note that the Queensland Government is currently redeveloping senior assessment and tertiary entrance arrangements and working with universities and QTAC to develop and introduce the ATAR for admissions in 2020 and beyond.

becoming more commonly used across the sector. As such, cut-off scores as they are currently calculated and published may no longer provide a clear representation of the admission standards and criteria required for course entry.

The University of Queensland is strongly committed to ensuring that admission requirements and standards are clear to both prospective students and the wider community. It is important that university applicants are able to easily access the information they need to make an informed choice about which courses and institutions are right for them and whether or not they have satisfied the entry requirements and are competitive for their preferred course/s.

In particular, we note the Go8 submission and endorse its contents. However, we remain to be convinced about the priority for a national tertiary admissions centre (TAC) and this is further elaborated in our response at Question 6. Our response to specific questions has been prepared with this underlying principle.

Questions 1, 2, and 5

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.*
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?*
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?*

University applicants will use a wide variety of information to decide upon their preferred university course and we believe that the Government may obtain more useful feedback on some components of Question 1 from prospective students.

However, we believe that the core focus and expectation of universities and TACs should be to provide clear information around admissions pathways and requirements as well as course content, structure (e.g. length) and cost. With this in mind, we would be supportive of reporting the following information (noting that in Queensland much of this information is already widely and readily available, both online and in print form from universities and from QTAC).

- ATAR/OP/Rank² cut-off in previous intakes, excluding any bonus points (where this is the core method of assessment – this would not be useful for programs with alternative entry criterion, such as an audition for music)
- The raw ATAR/OP/Rank of the lowest ranked applicant who received an offer in previous intakes in any offer round (this should include applicants who were admitted on the basis

² In Queensland applicants with non-school qualifications are assigned a rank according to a defined set of qualification equivalence schedules and assessed according to this rank.

of a qualitative/non-automated assessment of their applications through the forced offer mechanism, when the main criterion for the course is the ATAR/OP/Rank)

- Number of total offers made in previous intakes and number of offers made to applicants with a raw ATAR/OP/Rank below the cut-off (in effect, the number of applicants who were made an offer as a result of bonus points or other assessment)
- Clear information about the possible bonus points available (including why and how these are assessed and applied) and information about whether or not applicants can be admitted following a qualitative assessment of their application/circumstances/background and the circumstances under which this can occur
- Course fees
- General information about the course content, length, and whether or not the program leads to a particular profession or accreditation to practise

Our view is that applicants are likely to be most interested in knowing the minimum ATAR/OP/Rank required for admission (with and without bonus points applied). Including median and quartile results are likely to be confusing and add unnecessary complexity. However, care needs to be taken not to create false expectations where the minimum ATAR/OP/Rank required for entry may in fact relate to a single student, particularly one who was admitted on the basis of bonus points applied for equity purposes. A distribution of entry scores may be more useful.

We caution that care also needs to be taken to ensure that the reporting is measuring the same thing across states. The rank schedules used in Queensland facilitate reporting of cut-off scores for both school leavers and non-school leavers. These may not be possible in other states (for example in Victoria where non-school leaver selection is less automated and varies between universities).

We are supportive of the publication of indicators of graduate outcomes, teaching quality and student satisfaction and believe it is appropriate that this information is provided by the Australian government to ensure the data are accurate, valid and comparable (as is currently done through QILT). However, UQ would not support reporting these data at the course or subject level. Given the small sample sizes involved, the survey data are too unreliable and misleading at that level.

We see information around campus facilities and student cohort characteristics as being additional marketing information, the usefulness of which may vary from institution to institution. We believe that it should be left to individual institutions to decide when and how to publish this kind of information.

Question 3

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 system used in Queensland is quite transparent, given that bonus points are applied to the applicant's final score to arrive at either bonus OPs or bonus ranks (rather than applying bonus points to the underlying aggregate subject score which is then used to calculate an ATAR). While we do not advocate that all institutions should have the same bonus point schemes, there should be more transparency around exactly how many bonus points are available under each institution's scheme/s.

Question 4

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.*

Higher Education institutions already publish information about their admissions policies and rules and how applications are assessed. UQ, for example, publishes an entry options book [<https://www.uq.edu.au/study/docs/domestic/entry-options.pdf>]. Nevertheless, the sector could always do more to provide clarity/transparency around admissions and the Go8 has developed its own key principles around this (and which were communicated to HESP in early April).

Question 6

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?*

UQ is strongly supportive of student mobility and agrees that a diverse student body creates a dynamic campus experience. From our perspective, applicants who seek admission in a number of States are usually applying to highly competitive programs and are typically well served in terms of access to information and advice, whether online or in person.

In theory, a national tertiary admissions centre (TAC) should be more efficient than separate State TACs. However the level of variation in how admissions are administered in each State would make this very difficult to achieve in practice, for example:

- Every State has its own secondary certificate of education and so ATARs are calculated by the TACs but are calculated differently in each State.
- There is very little transparency around how non-school leavers are selected; Queensland is the only (or one of the only) states with equivalency schedules for non-year 12 qualifications.
- Bonus point schemes vary across States.
- State TACs also perform an important educative function with schools in each State and it is hard to envisage how that would be easily fulfilled with a national TAC.

In addition, while a national TAC could encourage student mobility, there would need to be further investigation around whether more students would travel interstate to study as a consequence. Other issues, particularly around the costs of living away from family support arrangements and availability of government funding, may be more of a barrier. The experience of going away to university which is so prevalent in countries such as the UK and the USA may not necessarily translate here without a better understanding of the underlying issues.

Recent discussions within the higher education sector have revealed varying levels of enthusiasm for a national TAC and it would be a lengthy process to arrive at agreement of a common, national admissions process. Although there would be resource implications for such a development, any move towards a national TAC would likely require government intervention to force universities into greater conformity around how admissions are managed and, to varying extents, some relinquishing of university autonomy in terms of who can be admitted.

Alternative suggestions which may be more readily implemented could be to improve the provision of information for applicants, such as through a website that consolidates admissions information from various sources (this idea attracted considerable interest at the May meeting of Universities Australia) and/or to implement a centralized admission form/website that sorts and allocates applications to the relevant State TACs.

Question 7

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?*

We would consider the issue of forced offers to be most critical in this regard. Forced offers are applied for a variety of reasons – whether due to administrative errors, for special entry schemes, or to manually split within OP bands – and so it would be helpful to implement a reporting mechanism of forced offers (to create greater transparency around merit based selection and ensure these are made for legitimate reasons).

Question 8

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

We note that some indicators are based on some very small sample data which make it difficult to compare/benchmark. We also support work being undertaken to improve the QILT survey instruments and reporting mechanisms.

Student retention data (adjusted to flag those students who left higher education and did not go to another institution) may be a useful inclusion.

Question 9

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?*

At a minimum, there should be clearer information on bonus points on state TAC websites. Communications to applicants could also be reviewed to ensure clarity. There may also be scope to include this information on the QILT website.

Question 10

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

Bonus points are an appropriate way to compensate applicants for disadvantage. Bonus points were originally introduced following research that showed the Year 12 results of students who had experienced disadvantage tended to underrepresent their true academic ability/potential³. Bonus points are appropriate therefore to the extent that they are given to adjust for this.

However, there is some evidence that 'overcompensation' may be occurring to allow institutions to fill their places in a more competitive market place. This could be monitored with analysis or reporting that tracked the academic performance (e.g. pass rates, retention) of students (particularly school leavers) admitted on the basis of bonus points compared to those admitted on the basis of their 'raw' ATAR/OP.

³ UQ can provide some references around this.

Question 11

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

There should be communication and dissemination of the revised (2015) Higher Education Standards more broadly across the community.

If you require any further information or clarification, please contact my office (email dvca.office@uq.edu.au or telephone 07 334 67754).

Yours sincerely,



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cc: Director, Academic Services Division & Academic Registrar
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