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**Transparency in Higher Education Admissions
Submission from
University of Southern Queensland (USQ)**

Background Context:

- USQ welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the important topic regarding transparency in Higher Education Admissions;

- USQ is a regional university which ranked third in 2013 for the proportion of students from a low SES background (32.68%), which is significantly higher than the sector percentage of 16.38%. The latest data available (2014) shows USQ ranked second with 33.1% compared to the sector figure of 16.54%;

- 56% of our students are the first-in-family to attend university;

- Approximately 30% of USQ applications come through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) with 10–12% market share being Year 12 school-leavers. The remaining 70% of applications come directly to USQ;

- USQ provides opportunities for Year 12 applicants to receive additional equity bonus points to boost OP or Rank for entry purposes but these are only valid for the period of admission immediately after the student has finished high school.

- USQ has a large mature aged (non-school leaver) market looking for flexible options to balance their career and life;

- Key philosophy of USQ - strong focus on enabling student success in well regarded academic awards regardless of background through accessible education and strong student support and retention (home of the Student Relationship Office (SRO));

- USQ already provides transparency through clearly stating program entry requirements on our website; within our Program Guides; Handbook; hard copy Pathway; Undergraduate and Postgraduate Guides; through events and through in-person school visits. All information is regularly checked for consistency across mediums. USQ's work is also complemented by the publishing QTAC does on behalf of all QTAC institutions.

- USQ offers a range of pathway programs for applicants who do not gain a place directly into their preferred Undergraduate program. Targeted and strategic promotion of these pathway programs has increased over the last few years. USQ now runs one of Australia's largest tertiary preparation programs.

- USQ will be reviewing its transparency in line with the Revised (2015) Higher Education Standards which come into effect from 1 January 2017. Work will continue with USQ's admission requirements, website, social media channels, marketing and publishing. International cohorts provide continuous improvement with respect to transparency.

- Comments in this paper focus exclusively on domestic admissions.

USQ Response to Prompt 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.**

   a. The most important point could be that with working lives extending out to 70 years, the decision of if and what tertiary study to pursue straight out of high school is not a life making or breaking one. And perversely taking that pressure off would clearly help some students and their parents/teachers make better decisions about that initial award.

   b. A USQ Marketing Survey conducted in March 2015 of 800 first term active students indicated that key decision making factors for USQ applicants included (not ordered):
      1. Location of institution
      2. Online flexibility
      3. Study pathways are offered
      4. Had the degree I wanted
      5. Reputation of the institution important (quality of teaching and learning, job prospects)
      6. Entry requirements: pre requisites, OP/Rank, English language requirements
      7. Influencers – parents, friends, peers
      8. Information about career opportunities post degree
      9. Costs
      10. Support mechanisms: customer service, career development, SROs, learning and teaching support, meet up, Phoenix Central activities, Meet Up leaders
      11. Student experience (quality of learning and teaching, support, resources)

   c. A number of studies have shown the impact of peers, parents/teachers and media in making the decisions. But for each student what has what impact and influence will also depend on their personality, their dreams and fears, and their life situation.

   d. USQ's view is that perhaps this question may have been better cast as to how to make sure each of the information options listed is available to all students in case, for that student, it is important.

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?**

   a. Messaging around preferences and 'dream preferences' as opposed to the course you want (or can get into) is also a factor in the applicant's course and preference selection. Messaging to influencers is key around appropriate preference choice.

   b. Guidance officers are influencers. Public reporting of schools and the number of their students who get tertiary places impact on clarity of message within schools.

c. Genuine applicants want to know whether they have a chance before expending the effort to apply and in order to arrange preferences.

d. Providing clear program pathways to the degree is important (e.g. Tertiary Preparation Program, to Bachelor of General Studies, to Bachelor of Education). This information is provided through the USQ corporate website content, university publications, communication with influencers and prospective students.

e. USQ provides publically OP/Ranks from the Semester 1 intake of each year on its website. This information complements the information which is also provided about USQ programs in the QTAC Guide, QTAC website and in our own printed Guides. What may not be easily understood to applicants is the way that cut-offs can change leading into the main offer round for each semester. USQ is moving to QTAC's more transparent daily offering model whereby minimum ranks will be set prior to the admissions period and provide more transparency. There are a multiplicity of factors that play into preferences.

f. A deep knowledge of ATARs etc. would not seem to be a crucial factor but more a guiding influence. The variability in students' certainty around what they want to study is one reason for this as is the impact of word-of-mouth and parent/teacher guidance (or stronger influence).

g. With respect to additional information or enhancements being added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website ('8' below) a standard format and single source (with any number of referencing links) for provision of such information should be determined sector-wide.

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?**

a. USQ provides for a range of bonuses to support Year 12 students who may have encountered some educational disadvantage as well as schemes which provide additional support for specialised cohorts once they are admitted (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Elite Athletes, Head Start). USQ has positioned its bonuses and schemes along with current sector standards and reviews these annually. These bonuses and schemes are promoted via USQ's website (http://www.usq.edu.au/study/high-school-students/advising-school-leavers/opportunities/special-admissions-scheme/admissions-scheme) and the QTAC Guide and website. USQ believes the use of equity bonus points is understood in secondary schools and by Guidance Officers and students actively seeking tertiary education in particular. To address this gap, USQ supports QTAC's current proposal for a bonus table on their website that reflects the bonuses each institution offers for each category.

b. With respect to additional information or enhancements being added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website ('8' below), a standard format and single source (with any number of referencing links) for provision of such information should be determined sector-wide.

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

With respect to additional information or enhancements being added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website ('8' below), a

standard format and single source (with any number of referencing links) for provision of such information should be determined sector-wide.

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?**

   a. With respect to additional information or enhancements being added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website ('8' below) a standard format and single source (with any number of referencing links) for provision of such information should be determined sector-wide.

   b. If an annual report is developed, consideration should be given to the inclusion of cohort entry requirement > dropout rate > graduation per each program per each institution including RTOs to aid increased validity and valuable reporting.

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?**

   a. Centralised management does not seem feasible and it would arguably be wasteful of the gains and positives of existing arrangements. Instead a national framework with as much consistency and clarity as possible would seem a more efficient and effective next step. This would build on the existing trajectory to commonality as far as possible and clear mappings where variations are warranted or preferred.

   b. As such, USQ agrees that standardised practices which allow for the identification of commonalities and difference between institutions and states would provide for better student mobility. USQ is supportive of ACTAC's proposal to investigate common assessment schedules and GPA calculations nationally. USQ also appreciates where institutions will wish to retain their option to use standardised mechanisms or to specify other means for entry. This could be dependent on quotas, cohorts, programs of study.

   c. It is recommended that further consideration also be given to Registered Training Organisations and non-traditional providers of tertiary education e.g. Australian Institute of Management be brought under the same centralised approach.

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?**
As proposed under 8, a standard format for provision of such information should be determined sector-wide.

   a. USQ is a QTAC member institution and as such works with QTAC to provide a consistent message regarding offer rounds. USQ will also take advantage of the new daily offering model which provides greater transparency in the way offer rounds and offers work. Strong communication plans to support the complexities of this style of admission system are reviewed by QTAC and USQ.

   b. Consideration might also be given to any entrance schemes that allow applicants an offer without meeting entrance requirements also be included for increased transparency.

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

Three enhancements are briefly outlined here.

a. Treating as "pseudo-institutions", the whole sector and each state*. That way a viewer might be able to quickly compare an institution's performance against these. (*probably including any relevant territory institutions).

b. Being able to obtain (probably as a pop-up from the institution name) a snapshot profile of the student cohort who provided the response. That way a viewer can see if the cohort has sufficient representation of the type of student that they (or who they "represent") are e.g. non-school leaver, female looking at engineering …

c. A "solution" approach to a number of the other questions. That is that the QILT should be extended to provide an index of links to the same information provided by each institution. It is preferable that the information is presented within the same page template/structure. There could be an index for "standard admission process"; "special entry options" etc. The actual pages could be hosted on the QILT site but pragmatically it may be best if there is central control of the information structure of the page but it is hosted on the institution's website (so it can be used for other purposes and not duplicated) The central control would also come through the link on QILT not happening unless the page meets the required standards.

d. Additionally, the USQ website provides information about quality of a student's experience with an institution and also graduate employment. Admission processes should they be added do not reflect what a student's experience will be nor their graduate outcome. USQ believes a student's chance of success is not only based on meeting entry requirements but also on the support provided and their own personal attributes of determination, resilience and courage. USQ believes that by purely adding program comparisons e.g. online programs, location of programs, duration of programs could further assist applicants to make the best choice for them. Inclusion of private RTOs offering same courses could highlight deficiencies in the quality of their programs.

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?**

a. With a view to extending the concept of additional information or enhancements being added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website ('8' above), it would be preferable to not have duplicated sources of information. But rather in all these locations links to the single source, probably on the institution's web-site with the same file name, or the relevant information, structured to the standard format (although institution's can have links to whatever secondary information etc. that they wish).

b. USQ supports the work QTAC is undertaking to publish comparable aspects of programs e.g. flexibility (mode), location, duration, fees and entry requirements. QTAC is a service provider who continues to add value by striving to improve outcomes for all member institutions.

c. To ensure transparency around bonuses a comparison table could be provided. This is currently being considered by QTAC and also acts as a State-sector benchmark.

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

The data needed in order to estimate (even at the macro level):

a. 'Sufficiency' is not readily available because there is a scarcity of (or lack of obvious ready sources for) such data with respect to the secondary school

sector. This then makes it difficult to determine opportunity and need at the post-secondary level.

b. 'Efficiency' is not readily available. This is addressed in the response above to 8 (QILT).

The caveat in this is that funding or other special measures need to be clearly branded as 'enabling potential to be achieved' rather than some form of 'deficit compensation' (soft option) message.

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

a. Public awareness and understanding is really most active when someone is either involved in applying for admissions or someone, typically parent or teacher, is supporting someone involved in this process. Therefore the matter of readily locatable and accessible, consistent and comprehensive information addressed above under 8 (QILT) seem appropriate.

b. At the individual applicant level, it would seem that the unnecessary "make or break your life" finality of the school leaver admission process creates undue pressure on students at a time in their lives when many other matters are also putting pressure on them. Therefore the existence of non-school leaver "later" options arguably needs more prominence in the school leaver process so that students can know there is life and learning beyond their first entrance score.

c. Addressing potential inequities in the space of quota managed programs. When compared to our competitors USQ has few programs that are quota managed however to achieve greater applicant transparency USQ would be supportive of greater transparency which may include publishing the quota; how the quota will be determined (fine grained discriminators), and how the main offer round ensures equity for applicants in view of early rank cut-off decisions.

d. USQ would support Registered Training Organisations that deliver AQF level qualifications also being given the opportunity to respond to the Transparency in Higher Education Submission.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please don't hesitate to contact us at Email: janet.verbyla@usq.edu.au or carl.rallings@usq.edu.au.

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