



VTAC Submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel

Higher Education Standards Panel Submission from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC)

What is VTAC?

The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) is the central office that administers the application processes for places in tertiary courses, scholarships and the Special Entry Access Scheme at universities, TAFEs and independent tertiary colleges in Victoria (and a few outside Victoria). VTAC receives, assesses and forwards application information and supporting documentation to the relevant authorities at institutions.

VTAC is not a selection authority; does not determine the selection criteria used by institutions and; does not decide who will receive an offer. All decisions about which applicants are offered a place are made by the course selection authorities at institutions using tools and data provided by VTAC.

After selection decisions have been made by the course authorities at institutions, VTAC sends offer messages to successful applicants on the institutions' behalf.

VTAC also:

- provides secondary school students with comprehensive, up to date information on tertiary institutions and the courses they run;
- calculates and issues the ATAR for VCE students;
- co-ordinates sittings for Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) and Australian Law Schools Entrance Test (ALSET);
- provides telephone and online information and enquiry services for applicants;
- publishes a range of guides to tertiary study;
- provides timely information to assist applicants via its social media networks, blogs, Facebook and Twitter; and
- conducts information sessions for secondary school students and their parents, careers practitioners and adults returning to study.
- facilitates placement of current and former interstate students through the use of Automated Results Transfer System (ARTS)

VTAC is not a government body—it is wholly owned by participating universities in Victoria and is funded by participating institutions and processing fees paid by applicants.

VTAC's unique method of publication of Selection Data

VTAC does not publish "cut-offs" for courses that select on ATAR. VTAC publish for each course, ATAR data that shows for the most recently-completed main offer round either:

- The clearly-in equivalent ATAR
- RC – indicating that the course selected applicants using a Range of Criteria
- NP – indicating that the course selected on ATAR but that the clearly-in ATAR was not published due to fewer than 10 offers being made to year-12 applicants).

Clearly-in ATAR

Selection data is published to give an indicative measure of the chance of an offer into courses for school leavers (referred to in this document as Current-Year-12 (or CY12)) whose educational history contains only an ATAR. Even though data is produced from CY12 applicants only, it should contain sufficient depth of information for the general public to understand how ATAR plays into the selection for a course.

Publication of Clearly-ins

A Clearly-in is systematically calculated from a subset of applicants; the current school leavers. VTAC defines this group through the use of categories. The categories used for clearly-in data are:

- Current Victorian school leavers
- Current interstate school leavers
- Current IB school leavers

Data is calculated after each simulation of the January and February rounds of the Main Intake. Round 1 offerees contribute to the January data and Round 1 to Round 5 offerees contribute to the February data. Round 1 data is published on the VTAC website at the same time as offers are released to applicants.

The publication of data is premised on the view that the clearly-in data be informative and useful in advising applicants about current selection decisions and likely future course selection.

To have a Clearly-In published, the course must use ATAR as the primary selection decision for CY12 applicants. The clearly-in ATAR is the corresponding ATAR value for the rank (with or without any bonuses) of the last applicant who was selected when all offers are sorted in descending offer rank order.

The table below shows published Clearly-In data for a selection of courses (de-identified).

ROUND 1				FINAL ROUND			
Clearly-in ATAR	% below Clearly-in	Year 12 offers	Total offers	Clearly-in ATAR	% below Clearly-in	Year 12 offers	Total offers
78.00	60.00	67	73	78.00	60.00	67	89
60.55	10.00	10	13	60.55	10.00	10	28
60.90	26.19	42	49	60.90	26.19	42	68
60.60	42.85	14	45	60.60	42.85	14	71
62.30	11.11	18	22	62.30	11.11	18	26
60.30	25.00	36	49	60.30	25.00	36	67
81.15	26.88	93	169	81.15	26.88	93	233
83.95	28.35	67	84	83.95	28.35	67	117
71.00	22.58	62	69	71.00	22.58	62	101
69.85	15.62	64	127	69.85	15.38	65	212
71.75	9.38	32	44	71.75	9.38	32	57
55.55	24.39	41	42	55.55	24.39	41	48
81.50	37.93	29	36	81.50	37.93	29	67
60.10	21.14	175	219	60.10	21.14	175	270
61.65	16.00	50	53	61.65	16.00	50	58
n/a	-	3	3	n/a	-	3	7
n/a	-	1	1	n/a	-	1	1
n/a	-	3	3	n/a	-	3	3
77.90	60.00	8	9	77.90	60.00	8	9
n/a	-	0	0	n/a	-	0	0
95.25	60.00	4	5	95.25	60.00	4	5
n/a	-	1	2	n/a	-	1	2

The % below is the number of CY12 applicants who received an offer and who had an ATAR that was below the clearly-in value. These applicants have received consideration for completion of cognate subjects (subject bonuses), or personal qualities or circumstances (e.g. bonuses through the Special Access and Equity Scheme (SEAS)).

Total offered is the number of applicants who were offered in this course for the round including both current year 12 and non-year -12.

Question 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?*

There are two separate issues here – knowledge of how ATARs are calculated and how published ‘cut-offs’ may influence applicant choices.

ATAR calculation in Victoria

Knowledge about the calculation methodology for ATARs in Victoria appears to be well understood. Clearly-in data relates only to the most recently-completed main offer round. ATAR calculation information provision is addressed through information sessions, publications, videos and social media interactions.

The Victorian ATAR is calculated from the aggregated scaled study scores for the best four VCE subjects (including one approved English subject) and up to two other subjects. The ATAR is a rank from 0 to 99.95 and is based on the population of Victorians of that age group regardless of whether or not they are currently studying VCE.

The Victorian ‘Clearly-In’

Victoria does not use the concept of ‘cut-off’ ATAR scores, rather publishing ‘clearly-in’ ATARs.

The original concept of the ‘clearly-in’, and the origin of its name, is that the ‘clearly-in’ is the equivalent ATAR above which all applicants were admitted. Based on their ATAR, they were ‘clearly in’. Implicit but never published was the notion that other applicants were ‘clearly out’. In between were applicants who might or might not get in based on a combination of their ATAR and consideration for subject choice or subject scores, or disadvantage or rurality or locality. What this says to applicants is that if your ATAR was above that point you were ‘in’.

The ‘clearly-in’ equivalent ATAR used by VTAC in published selection data is often cited as a clear and transparent method for publishing selection data. The combination of the clearly-in ATAR, the data on the numbers of offers in the course (both total and to current year-12 applicants) and the published percentage of year-12 applicants who were offered with an ATAR below the clearly-in provides a clear snapshot of the offered cohort.

Because selection data is not predetermined, careers practitioners, parents and students are all advised that the data sitting beside course information is based on last year’s data and should be used as a guide only.

VTAC selection data forms part of the information on each course published on the website. It is also made available to the media for publishing and comment and made publicly available on the VTAC website.

Question 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?*

VTAC believes strongly that the current suite of bonuses available is appropriate to meet the needs of students and institutions.

Bonus points may be awarded for:

- Subjects determined to be cognate to the degree by tertiary institutions
- Rural and regional origin
- Equity and/or disadvantaged backgrounds

Applicants and careers professional appear to be well aware of how bonus points are awarded and their addition to rankings.

Bonuses are employed to:

- Meet access and equity targets
- Ensure rural and regional applicants are better able to access tertiary education
- Enable tertiary institutions to select applicants who are better prepared for particular courses because they have completed cognate subjects.

Consistency in the application of bonuses across different institutions is neither possible, nor desirable because:

1. The awarding of subject bonuses for specific courses must remain the prerogative of the awarding institution who know best what they are looking for in prospective students.
2. While rurality and remoteness could be nationally assessed, regionality is specific to particular institutions who may wish to ensure that students from their local area are given additional consideration in selection.
3. Tertiary Admissions Centres have local knowledge that is invaluable in assessing applications for consideration under Access and Equity Schemes. Very individualised consideration is involved in assessment of equity and access claims.
4. universities are self-accrediting institutions who are responsible for determining their own mission and setting their own admission criteria and standards.

Question 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.*

“Early” Offers

VTAC does not endorse or facilitate the “early” offering of places to current-year-12 applicants prior to the main offer period in January/February.

There is widespread misunderstanding of the “early offer” process. Most people believe that these are actually offers made earlier than the main offer round but this is not possible under the rules of the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre.

What occurs in Victoria is a process of ‘provisional offers’ which entails advising applicants that in the event that they complete selection processes such as interviews, auditions or submission of portfolios or complete addition forms they will be made offers in the main offer period. Some of these ‘provisional offers’ also include school-based recommendation.

These ‘provisional offers’ only become actual offers once the main round selection process has been completed and, (where required), the applicant has met the listed conditions (often a minimum ATAR). Whether or not an actual offer is made relies upon the applicant having put the offering course as a sufficiently high preference to be made an offer there.

Other Alternative Admissions Procedures

Direct Offers

There are two classes of institutions participating in VTAC admissions processes:

- VTAC Institutions which are able to participate in VTAC selection processes.
- VTAC Associate Institutions which can only take applications directly to the institution.

VTAC institutions are able to take applications directly from prospective applicants and make direct offers under the following conditions:

- The applicant is not a current year-12 applicant; and
- The applicant is applying only to one institution for one course; and
- No offers can be made until either:
 - The institution can guarantee that no VTAC applicants will be disadvantaged by the offer being made; or
 - All VTAC applicants on the offer worklist have been exhausted.

Postgraduate Direct Applications

VTAC has developed a process for handling applications for postgraduate coursework degrees in a bespoke application that is badged for the institution and ‘powered by VTAC’. Rather than being restricted to offer rounds, offers can be made on a daily basis.

Question 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?*

VTAC publishes annual selection data that shows the clearly-in ATAR, the percentage of current-year-12 applicants offered with ATARs below this clearly-in and both the total number of offers and the number of offers made to current-year-12 applicants.

Additional data can be published if mandated or the VTAC institutions wish to.

Question 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?*

VTAC's data shows that there is minimal mobility across the states in the current-year-12 space. Many applicants from interstate had submitted preferences for Victorian universities (11% of all preferences for Victorian universities came from interstate applicants). Thirteen percent of all offers were made to interstate applicants. However, only 5% of actual enrolments were interstate applicants. This is shown in the following table:

Applicant Location	Offers	Enrolments	Conversion Rate
Victoria	41,783 (86.5%)	28,320 (94.2%)	68%
Interstate	6,335 (13.1%)	1,626 (5.4%)	26%
Overseas	204 (0.4%)	107 (0.4%)	52%
TOTALS	48,322	30,053	62%

Thus offers to Victorian applicants had a 68% probability of being realised as an actual enrolment, the offers to interstate applicants had only a 26% probability of being realised as an enrolment.

Internal data suggests that interstate applications are often based on proximity, so that, for example, an applicant from Albury, on the NSW-Victorian border, would see a Melbourne-based institution as closer and more convenient than one in Sydney. In addition, the relative perception of institutions belonging to the group of eight, also affects the conversion rate for interstate applicants. Consider the conversion rates for the institutions as shown below:

Institution	Offers	Enrolments	Conversion Rate
Australian Catholic University	74	15	20%
CQUniversity	16	4	25%
Charles Sturt University	48	3	6%
Deakin University	694	142	20%
Federation University Australia	47	14	30%
La Trobe University	758	173	23%
Monash University	1364	309	23%
RMIT University	712	190	27%
Swinburne University of Technology	181	46	25%
University Of Melbourne (The)	2196	672	31%
Victoria University	245	58	24%
Total	6335	1626	26%

Data from the Graduate Entry Medical School Admissions System (GEMSAS) shows that 85% of applicants for graduate-entry Medicine are willing to move interstate to study medicine. However, this is a very different cohort to those serviced by the state-based Tertiary Admissions Centres who are typically younger, applying for first degrees and applying for less specialised degrees than the high-demand degrees such as Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science, Law and Engineering.

The Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC) brings together staff from the five Tertiary Admissions Centres together with Tasmania, the Northern Territory and New Zealand. ACTAC ensures necessary collaboration across Australia and New Zealand:

- setting key dates for common activities such as close of application submissions, main round offers and release of year-12 results.

- Implementing a national approach to the calculation of tertiary entrance rank equivalents.
- Managing the process which results in the Interstate Transfer Index (ITI). The ITI provides a set of ATARs and notional ATARs that can be used across Australia.
- Exchanging current and past year-12 results via a national database.
- Accessing and exchanging results electronically from participating institutions through the Automated Results Transfer System (ARTS).
- Administering a suite of admissions tests for applicants without formal qualifications suitable for use as selection criteria. This includes the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) and the Australian Law School Entry Test (ALSET). National databases of these results are maintained and available to all TACs.

The five Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) work very collaboratively, dealing with matters of national relevance in a cohesive manner, and dealing with local matters within their own TAC. As TACs are owned by their state universities, each has very close relationships with the institutions and is able to provide targeted services appropriate to the culture of each state and the needs of each institution.

Apart from the necessary collaboration, ACTAC also manages Australia-wide projects such as:

- Common assessment methodologies for overseas qualifications
- Production and maintenance of a table of acceptable year-12 equivalent subjects for use in pre-requisites and subject bonuses.
- The Automated Results Transfer System (ARTS). Leveraging the close relationships TACs have with their home state institutions, ACTAC has for many years had a commitment from institutions to provide academic results electronically through ARTS. This facilitates the provision of academic results needed for assessing applications where applicants have some prior academic studies. ARTS saves time and money for applicants who do not need to obtain and provide hard-copy transcripts.

Applications are made to the TAC of the state in which the desired institution is situated. Application fees for current-year-12 applicants are typically under \$30 so there is not a huge cost to those few applicants who wish to apply to institutions in other states. There are no systematic or policy barriers to prevent applicants from applying in multiple states.

Each TAC operates and manages bespoke software to manage applications, processing and assessing of applications, providing applicant and assessment data to institutions and publishing comprehensive information about the courses offered in the state. Application forms feed into databases that are used in all the back-end systems that run the assessment and selection processes. To mandate a single application form appears to be unnecessary and would be problematic because:

- Data needs to be mapped to the different bespoke software systems used by each TAC.
- Information collected in each state is according to the requirements of that state's institutions. While there are many commonalities, there are also differences across states.

Question 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?*

VTAC's selection data includes data across all offer rounds. By publishing data for main round in January, and then for subsequent rounds in February, applicants are able to easily identify any shifts in selection standards across courses. They are also able to see, by the totals, how many offers were made after the main offer release.

VTAC works very closely with careers practitioners. As a result of the tools provided to this group, students are also supported and provided with plain English resources to assist them to work through the implications of the different offer rounds.

Question 9. *How best could 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 Admissions Centre websites, university and non-university institution websites, and/or Australian Government websites such as QILT and Study Assist?*

VTAC publishes information about courses available in Victoria in a variety of ways designed to best reach prospective applicants, whether current year-12 or other applicants. Publication of details about courses and admissions procedures is done according to templates that ensure that each course entry is formatted in a consistent manner, contains all relevant fields and is easily comparable to other courses. VTAC's publications include:

- On-line CourseSearch. This publication contains detailed information about every course that institutions wish to include.
- On-line CourseLink. This is a tool specifically to assist Careers Advisors.
- The VTAC Mag. A print publication that includes helpful information about tertiary study, selection of VCE subjects, selection of courses that may be pathways to careers as well as profiles of students and some helpful advice for applicants. In addition, all VTAC institutions are profiled in the VTAC Mag but no course information is provided.
- A VTAC App for mobile tablets and other devices. In addition to providing detailed course information, this provides a subscription service for obtaining regular updates to course information. Course information is accessible both on and off-line.
- Publications to assist years 10 and 11 students planning for applications including:
 - VTAC Gazette – a monthly update to policy updates and changes to courses.
 - VICTER – a planning tool for year 10 and 11 students
 - CHOICE: VCE studies and the ATAR – a snapshot of the tertiary system with examples
 - On-line course and pre-requisite planner which assists years 10 and 11 students create VCE programs and identify courses for which they will be eligible in future years.
- Publications for current year-12 applicants including:
 - ABC of Applying
 - ABC of Scaling
 - ABC of Offers
- Video tutorials showing processes and answering common questions.
(<https://www.youtube.com/user/vtacmedia>)
- VTAC website (www.vtac.edu.au) through which all the above-listed resources can be accessed.
- Selection Data is published at the conclusion of the main offer round in February. This data is also included in publication of course information for the following intake as below:

Sample of selection requirements for 2016 course entry:

Selection Criteria:

	YEAR 12 APPLICANTS (Y12)	OTHER APPLICANTS (NY12)
Prerequisites	Yes	Yes
Selection requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ATAR • Supplementary form (Some) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entire Educational History • Supplementary form
Additional considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEAS • Subject Bonus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEAS

Prerequisites:

- **Y12:** Units 3 and 4: a study score of at least 30 in English (EAL) or at least 25 in English other than EAL; and a study score of at least 25 in any Mathematics.
- **NY12:** As for Year 12 (or Year 12 equivalent)

Selection requirements:

- **Supplementary form (Y12-Some, NY12-All):** Current year 12 applicants are not required to complete this form. All other applicants must complete the Business and Economics Employment and Supplementary Information form by 21 December. The form is available from www.buseco.monash.edu.au/student/forms/index.html. Information on the form receives equal weighting with academic results in deciding the ranking.

Additional considerations:

- **SEAS :** Applicants who have experienced educational disadvantage are encouraged to submit a SEAS application.
- **Subject Bonus :** A study score of 25 in Accounting, Business Management, Economics, Geography, Health And Human Development or Psychology equals 2 aggregate points per study. A study score of 30 in any Mathematics equals 6 aggregate points per study. Overall maximum of 8 points.

VTAC reinforces these publications with structured information sessions for secondary school students and their parents, careers practitioners and adults returning to study. There is also support in the form of customer service personnel that are able to answer questions during business hours.

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

VTAC currently includes all selection requirements within each published course entry. Publications are mainly on-line through a variety of electronic media to facilitate wide access to impartial, comprehensive advice on tertiary course offerings in Victoria.

Adequate support tools are provided to the key stakeholders who work with students in each state; the careers practitioners. Victoria find this group of professionals, key in disseminating information and education students on their options and how to interact with VTAC processes.

VTAC has a very close relationship and excellent feedback loops both with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and Careers Education Association of Victoria (CEAV).