

Submission No 5

Dear Panel Members,

I am writing to you as a student with a disability whom has recently been through two undergraduate admission processes into a Bachelor of Psychological Science in 2008 and more recently a Bachelor of Psychological Science Honours in 2014/2015. Overall between these two courses I have applied for admission in, at least 40 institutions, where each course although accredited through Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) had differing entry requirements and occasionally differing GPA or 'mark range definitions' which could and have unfairly negatively affected myself and other students when trying to gain access into particular courses.

Among all of this, as a student with a disability I have been dismayed by the substantially differing disability support programs offered and the institutions' eligibility requirements for continued support throughout the course/s for a current or prospective student. I myself have identify as a person with an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) or Asperger's Syndrome. Although identifying as a student with a disability, and providing sufficient medical documents to support my claim should enable me to access services to assist me with my studies, there have been times where to receive continuation of assistance at UNE, or other prospective universities I enquired at, I would need to prove prior to the commencement of each academic year, that I still have the same condition, regardless of medical documents stating that it is congenital.

With some medical appointments and then reporting sometimes converting into hundreds of dollars this has wearied me, even in considering a prospective university. From my experience there needs to be more available information for prospective students with disabilities on the support services they may receive and the institutions' eligibility requirements, without the need to contact the universities directly.

Although I am a student with an University Admission Index (UAI) as opposed to an ATAR, I have entered tertiary education through "UNE's Early Entry Program". This was a new alternative pathway into university that allowed entry based on my commitment to study & school principals' recommendation. If it had not been for this pathway, I strongly believe that someone in my position, with a disability and from a "disadvantaged area" - Western Sydney, would not have been able to enter university until they were classified as a 'Mature Aged Student'.

This program allowed me to gain entrance to UNE for selective courses on the basis that I attended UNE as a full-time on-campus student. If it was not for this program I would not have been offered a place at any tertiary institute as I was unsuccessful in every other round of offers. This program is not open to everyone, but only those who had 'personal mitigating circumstances in their final year of high school' or "disadvantaged students" - Low Socio-Economic Status (SES), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People & students with disabilities. This program was brought to my attention by my year 12 "Job Advisor & school counsellor" as a viable option for me as "your attendance is solid & you're highly committed to studying a particular subject your 'interest' (Aspergers Syndrome trait) lies in". The only criticism of this program is that, I was not informed that 75% of study load was still classified as full-time, nor that I could drop down to part-time study after my first academic year. I feel that had I known about this I could have managed my disability better and been able to study in a better position therefore increasing likelihood of better academic outcomes. That being said, I was accepted into Southern Cross University for the Bachelor of Psychological Science Honours showing that my low UAI/ATAR conversion did not adequately indicate my level of competency for undergraduate coursework.

My most recent experience of an alternative entry, was applications for the Bachelor of Psychological Science Honours in 24 Institutions throughout Australia at the end of 2014. Using a Grade Point Average (GPA) high-lightened to me that there can be a level of covert discrimination to graduates of particular institutions. Not only do different institutions use different point scores (4 point or 6 point, or 7 Point), but even universities that use the same GPA point have differing scores benchmarks. As an example Federation University has a 7 point GPA, and so does UNE. However the calculation of the grade is based on differing "mark ranges" (See Table 1.). Even when converting from a four point to a seven point scale some students can be disadvantaged. With many of my own unit results at UNE I averaged 73%. Given I was constrained by UNEs marking rules I was still a credit average student with a GPA over 5, however had I gone to RMIT (after conversion to a 7 point GPA) or Federation University I would have a higher GPA, probably over 6, therefore a distinction average student.

Table 1.0

University:	Pass (P)	Credit (C)	Distinction (D)	High Distinction (HD)
Federation	50-59%	60-69%	70-79%	80-100%
UNE	50-64%	65-74%	75-84%	85-100%
Flinders	50-64%	65-74%	75-84%	85-100%
RMIT (4 point GPA)	50-59%	60-69%	70-79%	80-100%

The rationale for mentioning GPA is because the Bachelor of Psychological Science with Honours is classed as an undergraduate degree and just as important when considering entry and completion rates. There are many students who enter university to study just so that they can earn a GPA that enables them to transfer to the course they wanted to gain admittance in, because they did not have the minimum rank through an ATAR, and are not willing to wait until they are 'mature aged'. When using a GPA to apply for a course there is no discussion around the 'raw marks'. It is just taken for granted that you are a pass, credit, distinction or high distinction average student, not whether you would still be one if your had adhered to that universities' GPA scale. There should be a national guideline for GPA 'marking ranges' that is consistent across all institutes so that no student may be either unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by the choice of which institute they chose to attend first.

As like many students I too was eligible for HSC 'bonus marks' as I attended a high school in a 'Disadvantaged Area'. This program which is meant to increase university access for disadvantaged students, misses out on providing that main objective in NSW by restricting its implementation to those who need it most (OECD, 2012) by enforcing a minimum ATAR eligibility score. There is a multitude of data, reports and journal articles about how in OECD countries the lower your SES, the more likely you are to finish with poorer results than those with a higher SES. If this program has been designed to award bonus points to those who need it most, than those who are eligible for it, should receive bonus marks regardless of what mark they have obtained, otherwise we risk dis-incentivising them to continue their education.

Another entry mode to consider is applications directly to the individual university. This is almost the only way to apply for an undergraduate 'honours only' course at most universities. This is for those who have already graduated from another course, usually who have been exited before entering their 'honours year' at their graduating university. Some universities can be good and get back to you in a timely manner, however others can perform very poorly. From my experience with the Australian National University (ANU) admission process for a Honours in Psychology 2015, I was in disbelief with the timeline they provided between the first, second and third round of offers and the course start date. For the academic year 2015 I placed on a 'reserve list' of potential students who met requirements but would be in the 'fourth' round if it occurred. This was not even a viable option as I would've been unable to accept, as the third round of offers did not commence until 5 weeks after the course commencement date. How can a university successfully educate a student in a particular subject matter while keeping up standards, yet ensuring that they are disadvantaged by a failure in their admissions process and course timeline. This was not something I knew about until I started speaking to other past and present ANU applicants on Whirlpool Forums, who reiterated that late offers has been an ongoing issue for ANU in recent years.

I hope that I have addressed some issues raised in the paper, particularly touching on questions 1, 3, 4, 7 and 10, along with other issues that are not 'key issues' but can be just as relevant, as the paper highlighted that less than 30% of students have been admitted purely based on their ATAR. Although they are not key issues the other issues and or flaws I have indicated exist in admissions processes do touch slightly with question 4 & 10.

Yours Faithfully,

Mr R. Bradley

References

OECD, 2012. *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools Executive Summary*. Retrieved:
<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/49478474.pdf>