

Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

James Cook University is pleased to provide comment on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes Consultation Paper prepared by the Higher Education Standards Panel.

JCU endorses the comments provided by Universities Australia and Innovative Research Universities.

Terms of Reference

JCU notes that the Review is interested in the transparency of admissions processes and agrees with the primary importance to ensuring students are able to make informed decisions. Any changes to the data to be provided to applicants must clearly address an identified need, and transactions costs of supplying data must be taken into account.

The consultation paper invites further views on related matters, foreshadowing future work by the Higher Education Standards Panel on admissions and completions. In relation to this future work, JCU supports a full exploration of proposed principle 1 - *A student-centred approach...should be central to any solution.*

A student-centred approach is grounded in the recognition that the lived experiences of students undertaking university studies are extremely diverse; some are school leavers, others are in the full time workforce, and others are retraining after breaks in the workforce or whilst being primarily responsible for caring work. This diversity means that there is no one-size-fits-all response that universities could, or should, seek – instead universities need to respond to individual students' needs, their familiarity with admissions processes and to their complex lives. Progression through university might be fast-tracked or it might be prolonged, and both can be equally valid.

Proposed Principles

JCU is supportive of the proposed principles outlined in the consultation paper, but recommends that consistent language be developed that does not position ATAR as the norm, with other pathways as the 'alternative' (Principle 8 and 9).

Q 1. Information needed by students to decide on institution and course of study.

Many prospective students determine a career path they are interested in and select their preferences accordingly. Applicants in northern Queensland give primary consideration to location of courses, duration, delivery modes, cost of living, fees and campus facilities.

Applicants may seek to decide on their institution and course of study by reference to course reputation (often using ATAR as a proxy), as well as university reputation (QILT), staff teaching into the course, and other students' feedback about a course, as well as professional standing of courses.

In 1999, James and colleagues, reporting on a far less complex system than currently exists, ([Which University?](#)) found that students were generally not well-informed about the right program for them (1999, 76)–

Broadly speaking, our findings show that some applicants, an alarming proportion, are not in a good position to judge the appropriateness of programs for them or to judge the quality of courses overall....Applicants [sic] explanations of the reasoning behind their decisions often convincingly demonstrate that tertiary decision-making is not always a logical, informed process.

Applicants need access to high quality career guidance in order to consider how any particular course of study will fit with their aspirations, and broader workforce requirements.

In addition, whilst applicants may be clear about formal prerequisites, and also have knowledge about the inherent requirements of the course, they may be less aware of what assumed knowledge is presupposed. Readiness assessment tools can usefully assist universities and applicants to acknowledge potential barriers and ensure support interventions are in place.

Q 2. Impact of knowledge on ATAR rankings calculations and cut-off thresholds on student decisions on course and institution

The calculation of raw ATAR itself is opaque, and increasing transparency of how the ATAR is used does not make how the ATAR is calculated any more transparent. There is merit in considering ways that raw ATAR calculations can be harmonized across States and simplified.

Many applicants apply for their preferred course and institution regardless of whether they meet the entry requirements, however those who are more informed about cut-offs and pathways usually add some lower preferences to allow for the potential of not meeting all the entry requirements of their preferred course. In northern Queensland, most school leavers allow for pathways, and there is a lot of work done in schools and by guidance counsellors to help school leavers understand their options. However, many mature-age applicants often list only one preference, for which they are not eligible, without listing any other preferences. It is worth considering how mature-aged students can be better informed about the process of university entry.

It is important that applicants understand if they are competing against other students for entry, or if they only need to demonstrate their own capability.

Q 3. Is there sufficient information about Bonus Points; should they be awarded consistently across different institutions; do bonus points meet the needs of students and institutions?

In northern Queensland, many secondary schools are able to advise school leavers on bonus points, however this is not universal. Many mature age applicants are less aware.

Bonus points play a clear role in supporting equity-driven access to university education and in supporting a university's individual strategic direction. Universities have different social and geographically-related priorities in relation to equity and a bonus point system allows these priorities, enabling widening participation in particular. Bonus points should not be applied consistently across different institutions, although each institution needs to be clear how they are awarded.

University governance oversees the institutional separation of admissions from recruitment practices to ensure that bonus points are not used to fill quotas or targets for student enrolments.

An 'online calculator', where prospective applicants can answer some key questions to generate a list of bonus schemes for which they might be eligible, could help to simplify complicated institutional differences and enable easier access to information that is meaningful at the individual student level.

Q 4. Is there sufficient knowledge of the range of alternative admissions procedures?

In northern Queensland, most schools are generally able to advise school leavers on pathways, however many mature aged applicants do not have easy access to that information. However, school leavers, teachers and parents still focus attention on ATAR/OP cut-offs, despite non-ATAR-related entry requirements and options. Different groups have differing levels of access to information about how students are selected.

Q. 5. Should there be an annual report on proportion of students admitted by ATAR, and /or median ATAR for each course?

Standard information should be presented in consistent ways so that prospective students can reliably compare courses. Such information should include the different bases for admission, how many students are admitted against each basis, and the range within each basis (for example, standard information would include details on the proportion of students who are admitted on the basis of ATAR/OP, the range of ranks, the median rank; similar information provided for student admitted on other bases).

However, it needs to be clear that such data is retrospective, and that what happens in one year might not happen in the next, institutions may change requirements and applicant pools may also differ.

Q 6. Do TAC enable student mobility across borders, would a national approach be beneficial?

State-based TACs are not ideal for mobility because applicants are required to search for courses through multiple portals, submit multiple applications and pay application fees to multiple agencies. More importantly, TAC assesses applicants differently. In fact, it is possible for an applicant who has applied for the same course at the same institution to be assessed differently depending on what TAC they have applied to. Whilst this issue is limited to institutions who offer through multiple TACs, it highlights the different assessment methods that exist per state.

Q 7. Are mechanisms such as early offers, second offers, forced offers understood? How can this be made transparent?

Outside of TACs and Admissions departments, there is little understanding of how early offer schemes, top up rounds and forced offers affect the transparency of cut-offs. These strategies essentially hide the true cut-off, better transparency would be achieved by publishing the cut-off for courses where the rank was used as the sole basis of admission.

For strategies such as early offer schemes or forced offers, where selection may be based on criteria other than a rank, it would be necessary to publish the relevant criteria. This might result in some courses having multiple cut-offs and criteria published.

Q 8. What information or enhancements should be made to QILT?

QILT is one possible dissemination point for institutional data on admissions and entry pathways. The notion of capturing the “value add” from entry to graduation is possibly worth exploring. QILT could potentially include OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) results, this would make outcomes internationally comparable, and assist drive policy and funding support for, and institutional focus on, and the innovation in teaching and learning that is required to support excellence in graduate competencies.

Whilst QILT is an important source of information, it should not be overly relied upon, or the sole focus of government investment, in assisting applicants to make informed decisions. Under-served populations particularly require information and support that is relationship based, in addition to digital interfaces.

Q 9. How should comparable information on admissions be made available? On which websites?

TACs and potentially QILT have an important role in providing comparable information and creating public awareness of common processes and assessment. However, institutions should be responsible for ensuring the transparency of their admissions processes, particularly where the basis of admissions is not as simple as the ATAR.

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

A student-centred focus would ensure that admissions processes should be well understood by applicants regardless of whether they are mature-aged or school leavers, direct entry or entry via TACs. It would further mean that different admissions processes would be considered with similar levels of esteem, rather than alternative pathways being seen as of lesser value or rigour. Perhaps the language should shift from “Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes” to “Transparency and Equity of Higher Education Admissions Processes”.

Continued work with communities through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships funding is essential. It ensures that there is systems level work between the interfaces of universities and schools, and with other points of community connection. It is important that quality information and advice about transition to, and progression in, university is established at a systems level, otherwise the risk is that structurally disadvantaged students might fall through the cracks if responses and support is ad hoc. A very recent, helpful analysis of these important issues, which has highlighted the confusion and complexity of current admission systems, is to be found in the 2016 report by Harvey and colleagues [“The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity”](#). Those authors conclude that, particularly for those from a LSES and regional backgrounds, the different levels of awareness are “likely to be driving inequities of access along class, regional and other geo-demographic lines”. High quality careers and course advice is essential for all potential applicants, as are clearly defined steps that applicants can take to build and realise their aspirations.

11. Suggestions to improve public awareness and understanding of admissions processes.

Across sectors – secondary, vocational and further education, and higher education – there is a clear need to adopt common terminology in relation to admissions process and practices, which will allow for universities to administer their own admission processes more transparently. It is also important for applicants to be informed about the “value add” of higher education; in this regard to shift the focus from point-in-time ATAR and entry pathway rank, to success and graduate

outcomes that have been acquired over the course of the higher education engagement. This levels the playing field for the diversity of our current cohorts, and takes into account the well-researched correlation between ATAR and socio-economic status. It also provides something of a “HE business case” for many mature age students and those returning for postgraduate study. It is also becoming increasingly clear that better resourcing and consistent support for careers advisors in schools is required.

In summary, there is room to have comprehensive, community-wide education about what applicants can expect from engaging in university courses, and what steps and preparation they need to have taken in order to progress through their studies. There is a need to understand that students are a diverse cohort of people with widely varying life experiences, and that this diversity brings richness and depth to adult teaching and learning.

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