

Submission No 67

Higher Education Standards Panel Secretariat,
C50MA7, GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601
Email: HigherEd@education.gov.au

27 May 2016

Dear Higher Education Standards Panel,

Re: Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) of Universities welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) consultation on the “Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes”. In making this submission, the ATN acknowledges that its member institutions may make their own complementary submissions.

The ATN are broadly supportive of the ten principles to underpin initiatives to improve transparency in admissions policies and practices, as identified in the discussion paper. In particular, the ATN acknowledges that a student-centred approach is essential to improving the transparency of the admissions process.

The support for a sector-wide ‘principles’ acknowledges the competing need for universities to maintain autonomy over their own admissions criteria and processes and the need for a degree of compatibility across universities so students can reasonably compare and assess their prospects at various universities. The revised Higher Education Standards appears to provide the appropriate framework to enable this transparency.

The ATN supports the Universities Australia (UA) proposed approach to publish information in a comparable manner across the sector to help improve the transparency of admissions processes. This includes having better consistency in terminology and definitions. The impetus for such an approach is to have a user-friendly and simple way to compare admissions information and enable students to make informed choices about their future study. It would not constrain universities’ autonomy to design and use admissions methods appropriate to their educational mission.

It should be noted that universities, tertiary admissions centres (TACs), the school sectors and each state Board of Education have worked over many years to ensure that students are well informed on admissions matters. Increased participation rates of disadvantaged populations and stable attrition rates suggest that university admissions processes are working well. In light of this, the main issue appears to be one of the comparability and accessibility of information. As such, the ATN is supportive of any changes that improves transparency for prospective students and educates the general public on admissions processes.

In summary, the ATN makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

- The ATN supports a unified sector-wide approach to admissions transparency as underpinned by the revised Higher Education Standards.
- The ATN supports developing comparable terminology and definitions for admissions information as suggested in the Universities Australia submission.
- The ATN cautions against using the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website as an admissions hub, and suggests improving QILT to provide enhanced search functionalities and links to university websites.
- The ATN suggests improving Basis of Admission reporting as a mode of providing transparency and clarity for prospective students.

In relation to developing comparable information about entry requirements for university courses, the ATN supports the approach outlined in the Universities Australia submission. It must be noted that ATAR is only one indicator of likely success, and efforts in particular, to provide further clarity on bonus points and alternative entry pathways are welcomed. Such information is by-in-large already well documented, however introducing a (reasonable) standardisation of the information in terms of definitions and terminology is a sensible way of promoting equity driven approaches to university access.

The ATN would now like to address two additional aspects of the review in further detail below.

On the use of QILT as a national admissions hub

While the ATN supports greater clarity around how admission decisions are made, there are concerns about the utility of the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website as the central point of information for students to compare admissions standards across the sector (c.f. principle 7 in the discussion paper). QILT was designed for a very specific purpose – as a comparative website to help students choose an institution or program of study based on feedback from recent students and graduates in 21 broad study areas.¹ QILT help students understand quality higher education institutions from the perspective of the student, differentiated by fields of education and parameters of meaning and importance to students. The intent of QILT is therefore as a student-to-student 'voice', not as an admissions hub. Integrating admissions information into the existing study areas of QILT would run the risk of muddling the original purpose of QILT as ATAR cut-offs are not an indicator of the *quality* of a program.

Furthermore, in order for ATAR cut-off information to be meaningfully presented within the existing 21 broad study areas of QILT, cut-offs for a variety of courses could be aggregated or presented as a range (i.e. as a maximum to minimum or in quartiles). This could potentially result a high level of variability within study areas and present issues in representing the information, particularly given the mismatch between the number of programs offered across universities and the existing study areas of QILT. For example, in 2015, the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) offered

¹ <https://www.qilt.edu.au/for-institutions/about-website-data>

between 83 and 144 different programs at the three South Australian universities, each with its own unique codes and ATAR cut-offs. This would also require a mapping exercise to align every program offered at each university with the broad study areas of QILT or another such classification. In the long term, managing and keeping the central resource up-to-date would be burdensome, and unnecessarily duplicative.

If we were to take the QILT study area of 'Health'² as an example, in 2015 at UniSA, Health Sciences had a cut-off of 63.35, Human Movement had a cut-off of 70.25, Podiatry a cut-off of 88.65, and Occupational Therapy a cut-off of 92.25. Both options of representing this information - as a range (i.e. 63.35 – 92.25) or as an aggregate (i.e. 78.63) - do not paint the whole story when considering the objective of transparency and the sector risks repeating the problems that plagued the preceding 'MyUniversity' website in its ambition to be a 'one-stop shop' for students to compare universities.³

An alternative and more cost-effective approach would be to use QILT to provide enhanced search functionalities and links to university websites, similar to what is done on most state-based TAC websites. Universities, as self-accredited and self-regulating entities, would be responsible for keeping admissions information on their websites accurate and up-to-date (as they already do), and QILT could be used as a point of reference linking to this information. The QILT website could also easily be updated to provide guidance information of admissions policies, and arrangements on how ATAR thresholds and bonus points are awarded (as per the Universities Australia submission), with reference to individual university websites for further information.

Basis of Admission as a mode of providing transparency and equity

The ATN supports using the Basis of Admission (BoA) as a mode of providing transparency and clarity to the sector and prospective students. Currently, BoA information is collected by universities and reported for commencing students via the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS). BoA identifies the main criterion used by a university to grant a student a place in a course under the categories of: secondary education; higher education; TAFE/vocational education; professional qualification; mature age special entry provision; and other. The 'other' component of BoA accounts for 13 per cent of admissions and greater efforts at unpicking this category could enhance the utility of BoA information. An enhancement to BoA categories could be something that is done in future HEIMS reporting requirements.

Presenting the number of students admitted by each institution by BoA and publishing this on the Department of Education statistics site (much in the same way that the Department publishes equity data) would be one way of achieving transparency. A link to this data could also be placed on the QILT website or incorporated into guidance information. The advantage of BoA is that it can be split by Fields of Education and can show, for example, the proportion of health students admitted via the school pathway and non-school pathway. This would mean that those with aspirations to study in particular discipline areas, and those who have not had the traditional school to university pathway

² Includes the fields of education: 0609 (Optical Science), 0613 (Public Health), 0615 (Radiography), 061700 (Rehabilitation Therapies), 061705 (Chiropractic & Osteopathy), 061707 (Speech Pathology), 061709 (Audiology), 061711 (Massage Therapy), 061713 (Podiatry), 061799 (Rehabilitation Therapies n.e.c.), 0619 (Complementary Therapies), 0699 (Other Health), 060000 (Health)

³ <https://theconversation.com/does-my-university-make-the-grade-6236>

could see what is possible. It could also potentially help break down certain myths around admissions (e.g. that non-school leavers do get admitted to Higher Education). This goes to the heart of transparency and equity by allowing us to see universities who, for example are servicing higher numbers of non-ATAR school leavers into in specific areas such as engineering and medicine. Identifying and collecting more nuanced demographic information such as basis of admission will also assist universities to better target support and intervention services to ensure students succeed in their studies.

Thank you once again for allowing the opportunity to comment on the transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes.

For further information, please do not hesitate to contact the ATN Directorate on (08) 8302 9135 or via e-mail at: Renee.hindmarsh@atn.edu.au

Yours sincerely



Renee Hindmarsh

ATN Executive Director