



National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU)

response to

Higher Education Standards Panel Secretariat's

Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes

The Discussion Paper explains that the Minister for Education and Training has asked the Higher Education Standards Panel to “*advise him on options to improve the transparency of higher education student admissions policies, while minimising regulatory impact*”.

Potential students deserve clear and unambiguous information about entry pathways and the requirements needed to gain entry into a particular course for each of these pathways. The NTEU considers this information to be basic and factual in nature. By contrast information oriented toward helping potential students choose what to study and where to study is by its very nature subjective and qualitative in nature.

It is the view of the NTEU that the Discussion Paper conflates these two types of information. In doing so it obscures the very transparency that government is seeking in relation to entry standards. For example, knowing that 85% of students studying in particular program were satisfied with quality of teaching adds nothing to a potential students understanding of what ATAR cut-off score or other entry requirement they need to gain entry into that course.

There are two distinct questions. The first relates to information which would assist students in choosing a course and institution, while the second relates to the transparency of information about institutional admissions processes and entry requirements.

As the Discussion Paper points out, students rely upon a wide set of information to determine which course and institution is suitable for them. This information can be broken down into two distinct categories, namely:

Basic factual admission / entry requirements, including:

- admissions processes;
- entry pathways; entry requirements: and
- course costs; and

Consumer-oriented and qualitative information to inform choice, including:

- accreditation of a course by a professional body or association;
- potential career path;
- graduate employment and potential earnings;

- opportunities for work integrated learning through placement/internships
- institutional reputation;
- student reviews or surveys of teaching quality;
- peer student cohort characteristics;
- family history or other connections to a particular institution;
- recommendations from friends or family;
- location;
- campus facilities; and
- other costs relating to attending an institution

Basic and institutional information about admission entry standards should in the least be outlined as a distinct subset of information provided to students, and would contain information in relation to each entry pathway that included:

- prerequisites, including where appropriate minimum ATAR;
- any absolute minimum ATAR where applied.
- a guide to the likely ATAR score required to gain entry by publishing actual ATAR final (including second round offer) cut -off scores in previous two intakes;
- the size and criteria that apply to any ATAR bonuses;
- other requirements such as the provision of portfolios/interviews/external tests/references etc. – and the weight of these in determining entry.

Other (non-ATAR) based entry should include:

- minimum educational requirements;
- minimum professional experience;
- other relevant experience; and
- other requirements such as the provision of portfolios/interviews/external tests/references etc.

The NTEU would recommend the separate provision of institution-based information for each course on entry standards be presented in a simple and comparable format across all institutions in a format similar to that outlined in Appendix 1.

The remainder of our submission focuses on the transparency of basic factual information about admissions processes and requirements. While questions around the broader questions of the appropriateness and/or value of other consumer oriented information are important and deserve attention, they should not be confused with the former and are therefore not specifically addressed in this submission.

CONSULTATION 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.

As noted above, the NTEU considers that this question inappropriately conflates issues around the transparency of admissions processes and entry requirements with information that can qualitatively shape student choice in relation to course and institution.

We do not believe such issues should form part of the discussion around admissions standards and entry requirements.

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?

No discussion about university entry standards can take place without reference to ATARs. While ATARs might only account for 31% of all enrolments, they still remain the single most important category especially amongst high school students. Therefore, the NTEU is advocating that making entry processes more transparent also requires greater clarity and transparency as to what an ATAR is, and importantly what it is not.

To begin with it should be made clear that an ATAR is not absolute score of a student’s academic achievements. An ATAR of 100 does not indicate that the student scored perfect marks, but rather that student was ranked in the top 1% of all students being assessed, based on a weighted (or scaled) average of individual subject results. (Scaling also remains controversial, both because it is based on subjective decisions about the difficulty and popularity of subjects, and because it is gamed by students and schools to better maximise potential ATARs.)

In addition to understanding how an ATAR is derived, for the most part it remains unclear to most people that an ATAR cut-off score operates like a flexible price and provides a mechanism to match the demand for places in certain courses with the number of places available. The public and prospective students need to understand that a higher ATAR cut-off score does not reflect the relative academic ability needed to succeed, nor is a lower ATAR cut-off indicative of an ‘easier’ option. Making this clear avoids the risk that the presentation of ATAR cut-off scores may inappropriately create or deepen misinterpretations of the necessary academic ability needed to succeed in a course.

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?

No, there is not sufficient information about the awarding of bonus points within higher education institutions and how bonus points are differently applied. Authoritative information published through a government website would be of benefit to prospective students.

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

No, there is not. See Appendix 1 for NTEU suggested format for provision of relevant data.

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?

Yes, but must be responsibly handled and provide sufficient explanation about the purpose and role of the ATAR, including an outline of the role data relating to the proportion of students accepted on the basis of ATAR and the ATAR median for that institution might play in determining student preferences.

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?

Considering the push for greater student mobility, a national approach would be both more useful and more efficacious.

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?

There is little understanding of how these processes operate – arguably even within institutions outside of those involved in student selection. Greater explanation of how these steps in the admissions process work and students' options at each step should be clearly spelt out.

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

As stated above, there are two distinct categories of information:

- (1) basic factual admission / entry requirements; and
- (2) consumer-oriented and qualitative information to inform choice.

While the information might all form part of the QILT website, basic factual information about admissions process and entry standards must and should be kept separate from the qualitative information which more appropriately fits within in the realm of promotional or marketing materials.

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?

In relation to the transparency of admission processes and entry standards, less is more and there must be consistency in content and format.

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

In relation to equity of access to the information about admissions processes and entry standards, information should be available in a format which can be accessed by students and the families of students, which means that any web presence must be supported by an appropriately resourced call centre and would require the resources necessary to support active communication with students and their families through a range of online and printed plain English publications. To assist post-secondary students who are entering university on

the basis of their ATAR scores, there would be benefit in ensuring printed publications are culturally sensitive and in other main languages to assist family members.

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

As outlined above, it is necessary to keep information in relation to entry admission procedures and entry standard separate and distinct from qualitative consumer oriented information. We also believe greater clarity should be provided about:

- what an ATAR is and how it operates;
- various steps in the admissions process and students options at each; and
- different entry pathways and entry requirements for each laid out in a simple and easy to format as suggested in Appendix 1.

Appendix 1: Presentation of Alternative Entry pathways

Institution:

Course:

Entry pathway	Minimum Requirements	Bonus/Discounts	Notes
Secondary Education with ATAR	ATAR: Min: Cut-off 2015 Cut-off 2014 Prerequisites:	Local Area Low SES A&TSI	
Secondary Education without ATAR	Minimum results School recommendation Other references		Special consideration will be given to
Higher Education Course			
VET Award Course			
Mature Age / Special Entry			
Professional Qualifications			
Other			

