UNIVERSITIES
AUSTRALIA

DISCOVER LEARN LEAD

Submission - HESP Consultation on the
Transparency of Higher Education Admissions
Processes

May 2016

Further inquiries should be made to the Chief Executive:

Contents

Executive Summary

Universities Australia supports the objective of the Minister and the Higher Education Standards Panel (the Panel) to improve transparency without increasing red tape for universities, and appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the process for doing so. We note that improving information for students and parents on higher education options has bi-partisan political support.

In placing students at the centre of considerations for improving the transparency of information on university entry requirements, we agree that information needs to be accurate, comprehensive, accessible and presented in a consistent format across the sector. This has become even more pressing in the more competitive operating environment created by the demand-driven system.

Greater consistency and transparency will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of admissions processes. Further, better informed decision-making by students could also be expected to lead to an increase in student satisfaction, retention and success.

The nature, presentation, availability and location of information should be considered from the perspective of the prospective student who will be contemplating one of the most important decisions they will make in their lives.

Less than 50 per cent of these students will be entering university directly from school, many of them will come from disadvantaged and under-privileged backgrounds, and some will have experienced some life event that may have affected the academic performance at school but not their potential to succeed at university.

University admissions policies, procedures and processes have evolved to take account of the increasing diversity in the make-up of the prospective student load.

Out of necessity, they have increased in their complexity. Unfortunately, they have also increased in their opacity.

Universities Australia supports measures that, without undermining the autonomy of universities, ensure students have easy access to clear, unambiguous information that is consistently presented to allow for comparisons to be made between institutions.

In this context, Universities Australia recommends that the Panel:

1. Endorses and be guided by the student-centred principle of easy access to clear, accurate and comparable information that respects university autonomy on admissions policies, procedures and practices.

2. Ensure its recommendations, through the inclusion of contextual information, reflect the contemporary, demand-driven Australian higher education system designed to supply future labour market needs (both professional and generic).

3. Endorses Universities Australia's proposed approach to developing comparable terminology and definitions
    *   in particular, endorse Universities Australia's proposal to clearly distinguish between 'raw' ATARs and selection ranks that are actually used to admit students, and to clarify that 'cut-offs', when used, refer to selection ranks, not to 'raw' ATARs.

4. Adopt Universities Australia's proposed approach to publication and presentation of comparable information about admission pathways into courses.

5. Endorse Universities Australia's proposal that universities publish on course websites statistics and information on admissions in previous years (including, numbers and proportions of students admitted through different pathways; distribution of ATAR scores and selection ranks of school leavers admitted).

Introduction

Universities Australia recognises that better, clearer, more accessible information is needed to help students make well-informed study choices. Clearer and more accessible information will also increase the level of public understanding and support public confidence in university requirements and processes.

The information should also be provided where prospective students are most likely to look, including university websites, Universities and Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) and, if considered appropriate, the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website.

While large amounts of useful information is currently available on entry requirements and admissions practices, this information needs to be presented in a consistent format across all platforms and to enable greater comparability of information between institutions.

This submission makes a number of suggestions on how this might be achieved.

In acknowledging that the Panel's consultation is at least partly driven by concerns raised about the increasing complexity of university admissions processes, contextual information has been provided that we believe needs to be taken into account to ensure that the outcomes of this review support the maintenance of a flexible, high quality and equitable higher education system.

Statement of principle: objectives of university admissions policies

University admissions procedures are designed to select students that the university believes have the potential to benefit from, and succeed at, university. To identify capable students they use a range of different methods that take account of:

- Prior learning and experience;
- Cognitive abilities; and
- Capacity to learn.

Because of the strong correlation between socio-economic background and educational opportunity (especially at school), university admissions practices seek to:

- Identify student potential often using information additional to conventional formal education rankings; and
- Take account of applicants' educational disadvantage relative to advantaged segments of the population.

University autonomy

Universities are autonomous, self-accrediting institutions. As such, they properly have control over their own admissions criteria and procedures. They admit students whom they judge have the potential to succeed in the course for which they are applying.

Universities have a strong incentive to get admissions decisions right. Enrolling students who are not prepared to succeed impose a large cost on universities in terms of effort, time, money and reputation.

Higher Education Standards

The Higher Education Standards set expectations for universities on admissions policies and processes, and in relation to information transparency. The new Standards, which come into force on 1 January, 2017, require universities to document their 'admissions policies, requirements and procedures', and to apply them 'fairly and consistently'. Standard 1.1 states that admissions policies must:

> be documented, are applied fairly and consistently, and are designed to ensure that admitted students have the academic preparation and proficiency in English needed to participate in their intended study, and know no limitation that would be expected to impede their progression and completion.'[1]

Contemporary university admissions: the broader context

University admissions have evolved and diversified in response to changing demand, policy shifts and increasing rates of higher education participation.

ATAR: one pathway among many

Students entering university directly from high school make up a minority of university enrolments (in 2014, only 44 per cent did so, 31 per cent with an ATAR) and this has been the situation for many years. Today's student body is more diverse in terms of prior education, social background, age, aspirations and stages in the career cycle. University and course admissions processes, procedures and policies need to fairly take account of this diversity.

Similarly, institutions are more diverse in the range of programs they offer and the ways in which they are delivered.

Negative perceptions of university admissions are often related to a mistaken view that the majority of commencing students enrol directly from Year 12 and are admitted to university on the basis of their secondary school results. While these students represent a large share of commencing domestic Bachelor students each year, they have been the minority for many years.

The diversity of the student body is sometimes misunderstood in public discussion about university admissions. As a result, the importance of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) can be exaggerated.

While the ATAR is a useful indicator of the academic preparedness of school leavers, it is much less relevant to other applicants (that now represent the majority of university entrants).

For school leavers, the ATAR can tell you something about an applicant's ability to succeed at university but in most cases it will not tell you everything. While there are strong correlations with success at the very high ranks, and some correlation with lack of success at the very low ranks, the broad band of ATARs in the middle ranks (broadly between 50 and 80) indicate roughly equal capability and success rates. This demonstrates that the ATAR reflects more than just pure academic ability, and that other background factors are at play in the ranking.

Entry requirements must ensure that no student with the ability to successfully complete a university degree is denied the opportunity to do so.

As a criterion for course admission, the ATAR is less a measure of a course's academic difficulty and more a reflection of the supply and demand of places in it. The ATAR was most relevant in its use as a rationing mechanism when university places were regulated. Since the introduction of the demand

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[1] Minister for Education and Training (2015), Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015, https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2015L01639

driven system in 2012, the ATAR has become less crucial for assigning places but continues to serve as a useful – if not faultless – marker of academic aptitude.

Beyond the ATAR, it is critical that universities have in place a rigorous and robust mix of admissions practices that cater for both mature-aged applicants as well as school leavers.   It is equally important that mechanisms – including bonus points, special consideration and pathway programs – are available to deal with systemic differences in access to opportunity, and individual circumstance.

Contemporary admissions focus on potential to succeed as much as on prior achievement.   The ATAR is one means for assessing potential, but there are many others, including:

- VET study (complete or incomplete)
- Higher education (complete or incomplete)
- Professional experience
- Auditions, portfolios and interviews
- Admissions tests (for example, the Special Tertiary Admissions Test and the General Medical Aptitude Test)
- Entry pathways specifically designed to support:
    - Educationally disadvantaged students
    - Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds
    - Indigenous students
    - Regional students
    - Students with disabilities
    - Elite sportspeople
    - Elite performers in the arts

In recent years, concerns have been expressed about admission standards and increases in low ATAR admissions.   These concerns are significantly overstated.

In 2016, only 4.4 per cent of all offers were made to school leaver applicants with an ATAR of 50 or below.

While the share of low ATAR students offered a place at university has increased slightly: from 1 per cent with an ATAR of 50 or less and 5 per cent with an ATAR of 60 or less in 2009, the numbers, are small. In 2016 around 9700 offers were made to students with an ATAR of 50 or less, from a total of nearly 220,000 offers made the through the Tertiary Admissions Centres.

Admissions need to take account of educational disadvantage

Educational disadvantage – associated with socio-economic status and other factors – is real, and serves as a significant and systematic impediment to accessing higher education. Students from the bottom income quartile have long been under-represented at university, as have Indigenous Australians and those from rural, regional and remote areas.

The reasons for this persistent under-representation are many and complex.

It is apparent that these students have particular difficulty accessing information on admissions, including information on pathways specifically designed to benefit them. School leavers from these backgrounds tend to be more reliant on their schools for information, as they have less access to advice from their families and other social networks.[2]

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[2] Andrew Harvey et al (2016), The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity, Latrobe University, Melbourne

A very significant factor is the impact of socio-economic background on opportunities and academic performance at school, and therefore on ATARs. Students from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to attain an ATAR that genuinely reflects their ability or academic potential.

A well-known study undertaken by Cardak and Ryan ten years ago found 'substantial differences in the way early school achievement of individuals is converted into [ATARs] … based on their social background.' The research finds a gap of 'at least 10 points' between the most advantaged and the least advantaged group. The authors explain that '[d]isadvantaged students are unable to capitalise on their ability (as reflected in early school achievement) in the same way as their more advantaged, high SES counterparts'[3].

To spread opportunity fairly, universities make substantial efforts to correct for the reality of systemic disadvantage. This includes awarding bonus points for particular categories of disadvantage, as well as making greater and more deliberate use of entry pathways other than ATAR, for both school leavers and mature aged students.

All universities' admissions regimes incorporate provisions that seek to address equity and access. These necessarily vary between universities, taking account of the differing profile needs of their students and communities.

Demand for graduates

Participation in higher education has been increasing strongly for several decades. Governments from both sides of politics have, for equity and labour market reasons, supported policies that increase participation rates. These policies, most notably the introduction of the demand-driven system, have been extraordinarily successful in delivering on the outcomes they were designed to achieve. Labour market demand for graduate skills is being met and access to higher education has broadened.

Economic modelling commissioned by UA shows that Australia will need 3.8 million new skilled graduates over the next ten years. While labour market demand will grow, it will also change: it is projected that 40 per cent of today's jobs will disappear in the next 10 to 15 years[4].

The pace of technological and economic change makes it harder than ever to predict or plan for future workforce needs. A flexible, market-driven higher education system that is transparent and well-informed is best placed to deliver the graduates that are needed.

Due to the increase in demand for graduate skills, Government policies and university practice have sought to expand access to higher education, including to social groups traditionally under-represented.

While domestic undergraduate commencements have grown by 44 per cent since 2008, commencements by students from the bottom quartile of the income distribution have increased by 60 per cent. As a result, these students now comprise almost 19 per cent of commencements – a two percentage point increase since 2008. Commencements by Indigenous Australians grew 62 per cent.

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[3] Buly A. Cardak and Chris Ryan (2006), 'Why are high ability individuals from poor backgrounds under-represented at university?', Latrobe University School of Business, Discussion Paper No. A06.04

[4] Council for the Economic Development of Australia (2015), Australia's Future Workforce, http://adminpanel.ceda.com.au/FOLDERS/Service/Files/Documents/26792~Futureworkforce_June2015.pdf

Access and success

Contrary to exaggerated claims, attrition rates have remained relatively stable, despite the large growth in student numbers in recent years. In 2013 (latest available data), the first year attrition rate for domestic commencing Bachelor students was 15 per cent – the same figure as 2005[5].

That attrition rates are not substantially higher represents a major success for the sector given the substantial increase in the number of students associated with the introduction of the demand driven system. While there have been modest fluctuations over the past decade, overall stability in attrition rates challenges the claim that improvement in access to university has led to a substantial increase in the proportion of university drop-outs. Never-the-less, institutions are committed to providing adequate support to those less-well academically prepared and ensuring that their admissions practices are robust in only selecting students with the requisite academic aptitude.

Attrition, progress and completion rates are known to differ according to student characteristics. In particular, mature age students, who typically have more demanding work, family and other responsibilities outside of study, have higher attrition rates than young students who enter higher education soon after school. The mature age effect underlies differences in attrition and success by institution, field, mode of study and intensity of study. It also influences differences in progress by basis of admission.

For mature age students especially – but for other students as well – a sizeable proportion of attrition is driven by factors that are external to the university, the student experience, teaching quality and admissions procedures.

These differences point to the limitations of admissions processes and criteria as predictive devices. They also underline the need for diversity and flexibility in university admissions, to ensure they meet the needs of different types of students and support their success at university.

Issues to be addressed

The admissions process is complex, has many moving parts and is largely conducted within the university or a tertiary admissions centre. It is not as transparent as it should be. The following outline the more opaque aspects, and a suggested solution for each.

ATARs and other entry pathways

While the ATAR is the focus of community (and media) concerns, the majority of students, as mentioned above, are assessed and admitted on the basis of other factors.

Proposed solution

Universities to provide as much comparable information as possible on the types and number of other pathways available.

ATARs and selection ranks

There is some confusion about the relationship between ATARs and the actual selection ranks used to admit students. The ATAR properly refers to the 'raw' ranking generated by TACs on the basis of

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[5] Adjusted calculation using CHESSN. This is a more accurate figure than 'crude' attrition rates. Department of Education and Training (2015), Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2014 Student Data, Appendix 4, Attrition, Success and Retention, https://docs.education.gov.au/node/38149

a student's Year 12 results. An admission, however, is made on the basis of a selection rank, which is the 'raw' ATAR, modified by any bonus points applied.

Proposed solution

Universities to use agreed and consistent terminology that more clearly distinguishes between the 'raw' ATAR and the selection rank used for admission.

Admission 'cut-offs'

Confusion about the relationship between ATARs and selection ranks leads to further confusion about the meaning of terms used to describe admission criteria. This applies particularly to 'cut offs'. While this term is commonly used, it is not clear that there is common understanding of what it means.

Proposed solution

Universities to:

- consistently use agreed terminology that more accurately reflects admissions practice, such as 'indicative selection rank' (instead of, for example, 'minimum ATAR cut-off').
- provide information in a consistent format on the distribution of selection ranks and raw ATARs of students admitted to each course over the previous three years (for example, the mean, median, mode and interquartile range).

Bonus points

The use of bonus points and alternative entry pathways are a critical component in ensuring that universities can meet their participation and access obligations under Higher Education Standard 2.2.

However, there is some confusion and uncertainty for prospective students about how bonus points are applied. This has the potential to deter students from applying to enrol in their preferred courses.

While uniform practice in the allocation of and criteria for bonus points across the sector is neither feasible nor desirable, consistent terminology will help to increase comparability and facilitate more informed decision-making.

Proposed solution

Universities to:

- Clearly state the criteria for which bonus points are offered and the number of bonus points that are available.
- Adopt common definitions for each category, including "low SES", "regional", "remote", "a university's catchment".

Different offer rounds

Universities increasingly make offers outside the 'main round'. Early and late offers are often not included in published information, reducing the transparency of admissions.

Proposed solution

Both prospective information on admission requirements and retrospective data could be provided on different offer rounds, including early and late offers. In particular, data on previous years' admissions should cover all offer rounds, not just the main round.

A recommendation for a student-centred approach

Clearer and more comparable presentation by universities of basic, generic information on course admissions requirements will help all students to make more informed study choices and support public confidence in the rigour, integrity and fairness of university admission policies, practices and procedures.

Drawing on our suggestions above, we recommend the development of a model format to provide for consistency in the type and presentation of information. From the viewpoint of a prospective student, the model format would be guided by the following questions:

- What information will a prospective student need to inform their application decisions?
- What form should that information take?
- Where would they expect to find it?

Much of the information to be presented would be similar across different courses, especially for entry pathways and criteria other than ATAR. For the most part, information already published by the university could be repackaged and presented in a more accessible way. This would make it easier for students to find, use and compare information on admissions.

The effectiveness of the proposed approach would need to be supported by the development of common definitions for a range of terms and criteria.

To help students better understand admissions policies, procedures and processes, the model format would require the provision by institutions of data on ATARs of, and entry pathways used by, previous course cohorts.

A suggestion for what the model format may look like, and the material it should contain, is at Attachment 1.

Example of a model format for course admission information

This example posits a Bachelor of Commerce course at a hypothetical university. It would likely be located on the information page for that course alongside the course structure, outcomes, fees and other information. It would contain numerous hyperlinks to other pages of the university or other websites, as indicated by [link] in the text.

Admission to the Bachelor of Commerce

There are different admissions pathways for entry to this course depending on whether you are a school leaver (no more than two years out) or not.

If you are a school leaver click here [link to A, below)

If you are not a school leaver, click here [link to B, below]

A (school leavers)

If you are a school leaver, you will generally be assigned a 'selection rank', which is assessed against the indicative selection rank for the courses you apply for. The selection rank represents your ATAR plus any bonus points that you are eligible for.

Different courses set different selection ranks as entry requirements. Whether you are eligible for bonus points, and how many bonus points you are eligible for, also differs between courses.

Selection ranks required also differ from year to year. Some basic statistics on selection ranks and ATARs of students admitted in each of the past three years are available at [link].

In addition to the selection rank, some courses also require successful completion of particular subjects in Year 12, or a certain mark in particular subjects. Please see below for whether this applies to the course you are interested in.

Some courses set additional entry requirements over and above Year 12 performance. These may include tests, interviews, auditions or portfolios of work, depending on the course. Please see below for whether this applies to the course you are interested in.

If you have been disadvantaged by circumstances such as bereavement or serious illness while in Year 12, you may be eligible for 'special consideration' if you do not meet the required selection rank. Please see below for further details.

There are alternative entry schemes for admission to many courses for students who do not meet the required selection rank. There are also pathways courses that prepare students for many courses, if those students do not meet the required selection rank straight from Year 12.

For the Bachelor of Commerce the Indicative Selection Rank for 2017 is 75.

This number has been calculated on the basis of prior years' enrolment figures and the scores obtained by successful applicants. It is not intended to represent a hard cut-off for this year.

How we assess your individual Selection Rank:

School results

ATAR

The raw ATAR becomes the base Selection Rank.

In the last year's intake for the Bachelor of Commerce students were admitted with ATARs ranging from 55 to 99. The median rank was 74. The mode was 78.

International Baccalaureate

A table indicating a conversion rate between IB scores and ATAR is used by the State TAC, and can be found on the TAC website here: [link]

Overseas secondary qualifications

In the last three years, students have been enrolled in this course based on the following international Year 12 equivalents:

- New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 3
- [Other]

Bonus Points

For the Bachelor of Commerce, this university offers bonus points that can be added to a base selection rank for the following criteria:

- Regional background (3 points)
- Indigenous background (5 points)
- Low SES background (3 points)
- Advanced mathematics or language courses studied in Year 12 (2 points each)

A maximum of 10 bonus points can be added to the base selection rank.

Definitions for these criteria can be found here [link].

Special Consideration

Special consideration are similar to bonus points, but are less specific. They may be given to students who have experienced unanticipated disruption in their final year of school.

In prior years, students have received special consideration for:

- Major illness or injury to the applicant involving substantial time away from school
- Bereavement due to the death of immediate family members.

If you wish to apply for special consideration, more information on the university policy can be accessed here [link]

Prerequisite school subjects

The Bachelor of Commerce requires the student has achieved a Band 3 result in Intermediate Mathematics.

Additional requirements

The Bachelor of Commerce does not have any other requirements or prerequisites.

Other pathways into the course

For school leaver applicants who do not meet the requirements listed above, the University offers alternative entry pathways and methods to obtain equivalent skills and knowledge. School leavers have used the following pathways to enter the Bachelor of Commerce:

Pathway program 1 [link]
Pathway program 2 [link]

B (non-school leavers)

If you are not a school leaver:

Entrance Pathways

For people who finished school more than two years ago, there are many different ways of meeting the entry requirements for the course, which can include previous study in higher education or vocational education, professional/employment experience, admissions tests, and alternative admissions schemes. These pathways are designed to assess your existing skills and knowledge and assign you a Selection Rank The following entrance pathways have been used to enter the Bachelor of Commerce in recent years.

- Vocational education and training qualifications
- Prior higher education experience (at this university or another)

- Tertiary Preparation Courses

- Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT)

- Professional or para-professional qualifications/experience

- Employment experience

- Alternative entry schemes and programs

- Indigenous admissions scheme

Bridging Programs

The university also offers bridging programs to provide potential students with the skills and knowledge required for this course. Successful completion of these pathway programs will provide a Selection Rank. In previous years students have entered the Bachelor of Commerce after completing the following pathway programs:

Pathway program 1 [link]
Pathway program 2 [link]

The university welcomes any potential student to contact us if they want to know more about how our application process works. Please call [this number] or email us at [this address].