

FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

**Submission on behalf of the University to the
Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes**

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Flinders University fully supports the proposition that the process for the admission of students to higher education institutions should be fully transparent. It fully supports the proposition that the information provided to applicants, including information about the minimum criteria for admission (such as a selection-rank cut-off for determining admission) should be accurate and not misleading.

Flinders is confident that its admission practices have been based on the clear provision of information (including accurate information about entry-score cut-offs where applicable) and fully accountable processes. As elaborated below, Flinders acknowledges that one area of potential opacity relates to the basis of admission and Flinders undertakes to ensure that successful applicants are clearly informed of the basis for their admission.

Flinders University broadly endorses the comprehensive submission from Universities Australia (with the exception of one specific point of clarification elaborated below) and the comprehensive submission from the Innovative Research Universities group of which Flinders is a member. Accepting the broad framework of those submissions, Flinders also offers the following specific observations and clarifications:

Terminology

Terminology, and especially terminology around the ATAR rank, seems to be a potential source of confusion for applicants. Flinders sees particular merit in the Universities Australia recommendation that the term *selection rank* be adopted across the sector to describe “the ‘raw’ ATAR plus any bonus points applied”. This selection rank rather than the ‘raw’ ATAR should become the common and consistent mode for describing ATAR-related admissions.

In this respect, one incidental element of the UA submission is flawed. It provides, as an example of the way in which an institution should transparently describe course admission, a suggested wording relating to an exemplar course: a Bachelor of Commerce:

ATAR

The raw ATAR becomes the base Selection Rank.

In 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.

This suggested wording is awkward and potentially misleading. Only the selection rank is relevant to the admission decision. Accordingly the wording which the UA submission should have suggested for this example is along the following lines:

ATAR

The raw ATAR is modified by applicable bonus points to constitute the Selection Rank.

In last year's intake, for the Bachelor of Commerce students were admitted with selection ranks ranging from 55 to 99.

The notion of "bonus points" has some capacity to cause confusion. Equity-related bonus points are not intended to provide an unearned "bonus" in the sense of some gratuitous extra weighting. Rather equity-related bonus points are intended to correct for the systematic under-weighting that tends to be embedded in the 'raw' ATARs for applicants from equity-identified social backgrounds. In that sense, the selection rank is held to be a more legitimate measure of academic capacity than the 'raw' ATAR.

The SA/NT common cross-institutional "bonus point" regime

Commencing this year, Flinders has joined with the University of Adelaide, the University of South Australia and Charles Darwin University in adopting a common SA/NT bonus-point regime for translating an applicant's "raw" ATAR into a "selection rank". The calculation and application of equity-related and subject-related bonus points under this common regime is managed entirely through the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC). The bonus-inclusive "selection rank" forms the basis for the admission decision for ATAR-pathway applicants at all four institutions. Because each applicant is informed of their bonus-inclusive 'selection rank' at the same time that they are informed of their "raw" ATAR ranking, this new regime has considerably enhanced the clarity and transparency of the admissions process from an applicant perspective.

That Flinders University, the University of Adelaide, the University of South Australia and Charles Darwin University, four quite different institutions, can agree on the detail and administration of a common bonus point regime suggests that sector-wide agreement might be possible.

Clarifying the successful applicants' basis of admission

Applicants may present with qualifications applicable to more than one admission pathway. In reflecting on the transparency of the process from an applicant perspective, Flinders has noted that the basis for their admission to the University may not have always been clear to all successful applicants. For example, it may not be sufficiently clear to an applicant that, notwithstanding their qualification (such as selection rank) sitting below the published cut-off applied to one pathway, they were successful in securing admission through meeting the published selection criteria under another pathway. This may also be a potential source of confusion for commentators and analysts interpreting admission processes and outcomes. Flinders has accordingly initiated a discussion through SATAC to ensure that henceforth the transmission of an offer of admission to an applicant will also specify the basis for admission.

State-based Tertiary Admissions Centre arrangements

The Discussion Paper poses a particular question about "the current state-based Tertiary Admissions Centre arrangements" and asks whether "a more national approach to managing applications across borders" would be "beneficial".

Noting that education sits formally within the constitutional jurisdiction of State governments, the current TAC arrangements essentially reflect Australia's federal governmental structure. The arrangements mirror the virtues and limitations of federalism in general. Among the virtues are sensitivity to local history and practice (including the State-based Year 12 certificates and the culture of the State-based secondary education systems) and the capacity of federalist structures for fostering innovation (exemplified by the recent SA/NT common bonus point initiative). While in principle the fragmentation of the national admissions "market" could potentially inhibit the application process from a student

perspective, in practice there is little evidence of any significant inhibition. Applicants can, and do, readily apply to interstate TACs irrespective of their State of residence. There is well-embedded cross-TAC mutual recognition of ATAR-based selection ranks.

If anything, there is some momentum in the admissions domain is towards the further fragmentation of direct institution-specific admission rather than towards a single, less flexible, national regime. In this dynamic situation, State-based TACs occupy a nicely balanced position, being sufficiently consolidated across multiple institutions to harvest the benefits of efficiency and economies of scale while also being sufficiently local to retain flexible applicant-sensitive and institution-sensitive administration.

International admissions

The focus of the Discussion Paper is on domestic admissions to Australian higher education institutions. The same principles of transparency, consistency and accountability ought to apply to the important onshore international market as well, complicated by the ubiquitous role of agents in the recruitment process. The Innovative Research Universities submission makes the pertinent point that the international admissions domain has in some ways anticipated the way in which the domestic domain is evolving.

The applicant's relative merit compared with other applicants has become less important; whether the applicant is capable of the course more important. This draws the domestic selection process closer to the process for international students, highlighting universities' longstanding ability to assess applicants for capacity to complete a course over a hierarchical assessment of rank.