

Improving the transparency of university admission decisions

The consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes is an opportunity to improve potential university applicants' understanding of tertiary admission processes in Australia. The outcome should be to ensure applicants are clearer about their likelihood of an offer for the courses that interest them, encouraging them to apply.

To achieve this each university and other higher education provider should, where it does not already, makes available information about:

- the different bases for applying for entry and the way in which an applicant's capability will be assessed; and
- the number and success of applicants from previous periods.

The information and data should apply to each common basis of entry and related assessment mechanism. It should apply to all courses from sub-bachelor through to postgraduate coursework.

The target for the information and data is the individuals considering university or other higher education, to assist them to convert their interest into application to a course suitable to them with a reasonable expectation of being accepted. It is important that national level evaluation perspective does not compromise the clarity of information for the individual applicant each of whom will need access to a small set of the admission information and related data.

The IRU submission addresses in turn:

- how changes in higher education change the admission process;
- the areas of potential confusion about admission processes as the basis for clarifying public understanding;
- the principles proposed in the Panel's discussion paper; and
- the actions needed to improve understanding of admission processes to ensure suitable transparency.

A. Changes in higher education change the admission process

Impact of demand driven access to higher education

The need to renew public understanding about admission processes follows the introduction of demand driven funding for undergraduate university places from 2012. It confirmed a major transition in access to higher education that shifts past assumptions about entry to university.

The objective of demand driven funding is that each eligible Australian who wants to study at university should receive an offer of a place.

The impact is to alter the focus for many university admission processes. 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.

Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2015 shows that 30% of applications were made direct to the university of choice for the applicant, with 80% receiving an offer. Of the 70% of applications through a Tertiary Admission Centre 56% received their first preference. In total across both, 63% received an offer for the course they preferred.

Many more offers are made soon after application in a rolling process across the year to give certainty to the applicant and university. This is particularly useful for older applicants who need to plan for study and who are not waiting on school results to confirm their basis for admission.

The result of this change is that potential applicants need to focus on which course most suits them, putting less emphasis on questions about whether they will be selected.

The recent Harvey et al study *The Adaption of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity* shows that potential applicants from families and regions where take up of higher education is low are less informed about the options available and more likely to assume the old paradigm of universities as only highly selective institutions. Greater clarity about selection and the continued reduction in emphasis on relative rankings will make it easier for such applicants to identify their best options.

Diversity within a national system

Universities are subject to regular calls to be more diverse to offer different approaches to the same end (a degree qualification). This can lead to more diverse approaches to selection and certainly to more direct applicant to university discussions and decisions.

Some of the discussion for the transparency of selection debate argues for greater national consistency and even a common national process. The risks of seeking greater national consistency is that it discourages valid approaches to the selection of students.

State based admission centres were created to allow each university to select from the most capable student downwards, matched against each applicant's preferred ranking of courses. As argued in the PhillipsKPA report *Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre: Strategic Directions Project, 2010 – 2013*, (May 2010) the change to encourage higher levels of enrolment should alter the focus of Tertiary Admission Centres to being an efficient means to collect applications allowing the preferred institution to make an offer where possible and soon after application.

State based Centres reflect the historic focus of most students at their local university options, with those living near State borders using two Centres. A national Centre has often been mooted but falters against the reality that the State Centres exist and cater well for the large majority of applicants which use them.

Growth in professional masters degrees

There are now many postgraduate courses which offer Commonwealth Supported Places in a mix with fee paying places. A significant area of growth is the move of many professional qualifications to the Masters level away from bachelor, a practice some universities apply for all such degrees.

Entry is based on the applicants' higher education record, with allocation between funded and fee based postgraduate places a university decision. The consideration of transparency should apply to these courses as much as to those at the undergraduate level.

B. Areas of potential confusion

1. Clarity about the various educational pathways for entry to undergraduate courses

All universities recognise a range of potential educational backgrounds. The data reported in the discussion paper makes clear that there are several major routes into an undergraduate university degree of which school leavers are the largest set while being substantially less than half of Australian applicants. Even the most selective courses have applicants with a mix of school leavers and those with part or complete bachelor degrees.

Australian universities cater for large numbers of older applicants who are assessed based on a mix of aptitude tests, previous education at any level and perceived readiness for university study. These applicants may well have a year 12 certificate but those results are largely irrelevant to the current capacity for university study.

The desirable outcome from the process is that the spread of educational backgrounds at application is better understood so that potential applicants can see what others with similar educational backgrounds have done.

2. Clarity about the means used to assess the educational capability of applicants

The assessment of applicants' suitability aligns with the basis of application but it is not complete.

- School leavers are mostly assessed based on Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), with the panel indicating 30% are accepted on other than an ATAR basis.
- Those with part or complete higher education degrees are usually assessed against that fact.
- VET and other non higher education qualifications are considered.
- Applicants sit specific capability tests, whether general or specific for some disciplines.

Applicants may have multiples bases against which to be considered, that can complicate the explanation of a decision to admit. That an applicant has an ATAR may not mean it was considered or considered with much weight. This complicates the data about offers to people with low ATARs since the ATAR may not have been the basis for the offer.

ATAR is an indirect measure of capability since it tells the position of a school leaver against other school leavers without actually demonstrating one way or another the actual achievement of the student. Where there is an issue about the suitability of the school leaver it is the underlying level of knowledge and capability that matters as shown in the school results from which the ATAR is constructed. A successful school system is one where all those completing a year 12 certificate have the foundation knowledge for higher education whether or not the person wants to use it. No matter how effective or ineffective the school system the ATAR will allocate the same number of students to any given rank.

The other mechanisms to assess applicants draw on direct measures of their capacity such as passing units in another degree or results on an ability test.

The assessments all tread the fine line that links what an applicant has previously done to how well that person is likely to do next. Ultimately is what the person will do next that should matter: university entry is not a reward for previous study but about the person gaining a new body of knowledge and associated skills.

How each university does this is university specific. Each faces the challenge to give further clarity on what assessment an applicant will be judged by. As a complete set of data covering all courses and all bases for assessment within each this could look complicated. Taken for an individual who has a known background and known target qualification, it should not be so complicated.

3. *Inclusive and exclusive benchmarks*

Some universities will define threshold points, whether to say all those who meet the threshold will get an offer or to say only those who meet it will be considered for an offer. These are both reasonable options for a university to use. Where a university defines a point, it needs to be clear what is meant and to be able to show that it has held to the intent.

4. *The use of bonus points*

Where a university chooses to amend the standard application of an entry assessment mechanism – this seems to apply mostly to ATAR but can affect others too – it needs to be stated so an individual can determine whether the bonus applies to them and the impact that has on their likelihood of an offer. Greater exposure may draw more arguments against the use of adjustments to ranks like the ATAR.

The focus need to be that the final decision on access is a fair assessment of each individual and where some are being chosen over others that the basis for doing so is clear.

5. *Data and its indicative but not prescriptive meaning*

To publish information about what happened in year X as basis for applicants for year X+1 is likely useful and cannot harm. However where such data is provided it has to be clear that the correlation from year to year is not always strong, particularly in courses with smaller pools of applicants and offers.

C. Principles

The higher education Standards Panel lists 10 principles to stimulate discussion. These mostly make sense.

1. *A student-centred approach to transparency should be central to any solution.*

The crucial aspect of this is that the judgement of clarity is whether a person with a particular background and set of interests can find and then understand what is relevant to him or her. The reality is that no one applicant is likely to want to access all the information just the relevant subset.

The apparent complexity of the full suite of information, and lack of perfect alignment in approach and terminology should not override the focus at what applicants are likely to need and ease of access to it.

2. *All students, no matter what their backgrounds, should have the same knowledge of how admissions arrangements work.*

A worthy aim that needs to acknowledge that some will likely remain better informed. The Harvey study shows the challenge for those least familiar with higher education to understand all the options that they have.

'All applicants' would be more precise.

3. *The broad autonomy of institutions over their admissions policies should be accepted, providing that these policies are compliant with the Higher Education Standards.*

That is, universities are responsible for the decisions. One of the consequences of encouraging universities to become more diverse is that universities may do things differently from each other, including taking different approaches to assessing the merits of applicants.

The final approach must allow for university by university differences and not constrain legitimate selection mechanisms.

4. *The revised Higher Education Standards, which will take effect from 1 January 2017, should provide the operating framework: they contain clearly articulated requirements in relation to admissions transparency, the provision of information for prospective students, and the quality of learning environments.*

Key words from the Standards that should be the basis for improving public understanding are:

“admitted students [should] have the academic preparation and proficiency in English needed to participate in their intended study, and no known limitations that would be expected to impede their progression and completion”

5. *Any new requirements or changes should apply equally to all higher education institutions, universities and non-university higher education institutions alike.*

Yes.

6. *Consistently presented and comparable information on all entry pathways and requirements should be available for each institution by discipline or by course.*

Consistent within an institution, yes. If consistent across institutions the level of specifics required will need to be higher. The risk is that rules about information drive how a university or other provider decides who to make an offer to. The same applies to ‘comparable’: the test is whether an individual with particular aspirations can reasonably understand what is required of them.

7. *A guide to admissions policies and student enrolments should be made available through a single online platform for ease of access.*

The wording is not clear but this appears to mean a national platform. If so the guide will need to be fairly high level with links to institution relevant information.

8. *Universities Australia and other higher education peak bodies should publicly support clarity on how ATARs scores are used and the manner in which alternative admissions pathways and policies are applied.*

The principle slips in its language.

- Rather than ATAR versus alternatives the presentation ought to be about the various bases for assessment, treated in order of commonality. Universities would best not refer to non ATAR routes as ‘alternative’.
- The panel ought to refer to an ATAR as a rank not a score.

9. *It should be made clear that ATAR thresholds do not operate as a strict 'cut-off'; that thresholds generally apply to (bonus point) adjusted ATARs; and that prior year ATAR thresholds are provided only as a guide to prospective students.*

The Principle is broadly correct but is not clear who is to make all this clear. The question of what data about past ATAR and other numeric based selection tools is made available is important.

It should apply to all tools that are used, with a focus on the spread of successful ranks or scores. The spread provides the information to applicants about who had previously taken the course and counters assumptions that the lowest point defines the quality of the course.

10. *Higher education institutions should be held accountable for public claims against their stated entry policies.*

Yes; including for claims about actual outcomes.

D. The way ahead

IRU supports the effort of Universities Australia to develop a guide for how universities can make available information about:

- the different bases for applying for entry and the way in which an applicant's capability will be assessed; and
- the number and success of applicants from previous periods.

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