

**Australian Catholic University (ACU) submission  
to Higher Education Standards Panel  
Consultation on the Transparency of Higher  
Education Admissions Processes**

**May 2016**

## **ACU submission to Higher Education Standards Panel Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the Government's efforts to improve transparency in university admissions processes through the Higher Education Standards Panel (the Panel) and appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission.

Under a demand driven system of higher education funding, it is critical that students have access to sufficient information to enable them to make the best choice for their future. Ideally, applicant choices should be based not just on an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score, but on robust career advice, knowledge of which courses will lead to their preferred career, course location, prerequisites, and entrance requirements.

Information about university courses and admissions is complex. At present there is a lack of transparency for applicants about different entry pathways and admissions requirements and significant inconsistency in the information available through Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) and university websites.

As noted in the Panel's consultation paper, universities select students using different mechanisms and take into account a range of factors, including ATARs, prior study, and professional qualifications. The calculation of the ATAR cut-off is often poorly understood by school leavers and the application of bonus points, information about early and alternative entry schemes, and rankings for non-school leavers can be unclear.

ACU agrees with the need to improve the quality, consistency and transparency of information available to university applicants and recommends the Panel consider the following options for improvement:

- Improved transparency, including the introduction of consistent terminology for:
  - ATAR cut-offs and their meaning;
  - bonus points;
  - additional requirements; and
  - alternative entry schemes.
- A calculator for school leavers and non-school leavers to estimate their potential entry score<sup>1</sup>.
- A voluntary scheme for universities which would provide a best practice system for the publication of ATAR cut-offs and entry scores, medians and ranges.
- Agreement amongst institutions on broad issues such as the legitimate grounds for bonuses, the calculation of bonuses, the maximum addition of bonuses and the legitimate types of alternative entry schemes.
- A national set of equivalency standards for non-school leavers.

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<sup>1</sup> Monash University provides a Special Entry Access Scheme (bonus points) calculator on its website at [www.monash.edu/admissions/help/seas](http://www.monash.edu/admissions/help/seas)

## CONTEXT

The ATAR alone is not fit for purpose in a demand driven system.

Successive governments have argued for more Australians to receive a university education in order to improve the nation's productivity and knowledge economy and to enable Australians to create and fill higher-skilled jobs. As a greater proportion of young Australians enter university, it is arithmetically inevitable that many will do so with lower ATARs, as the ATAR is a relative ranking, not an absolute score.

Therefore, while the ATAR is one relevant indicator of student capacity, it should not be the only mechanism used in university admissions.

There is a misconception that admitting students with lower ATARs necessarily results in greater attrition or drop-out rates. Since the introduction of the demand driven system, however, retention figures have remained relatively stable, indicating that students who are admitted to university with lower ATARs or on the basis of other factors are sticking with study, and ultimately succeeding.

Moreover, university entrance scores have a strong correlation with socioeconomic status<sup>2</sup>, meaning that heavy or exclusive reliance on ATARs in selection results in an elitist approach that closes the doors of opportunity to students who are socially or economically disadvantaged.

It should also be noted that current year 12 qualifications were not designed as tests for university. It is possible to get a relatively high ATAR with no academic writing subjects, for example. Likewise, in many instances, the ATAR is insufficient as the sole determinant of capacity, for instance in professional courses (such as teacher education), where additional personal characteristics and skills are required, or for visual and performing arts.

Bonus points and access schemes were established to improve access. While they are sometimes criticised as 'back-door' entries, they serve an important egalitarian role in improving opportunity by taking into account a fuller range of characteristics that make an applicant suitable for entry into a university course. The use of bonus points, however, could be more transparent.

One common misconception is that an overwhelming majority of applicants to universities are school leavers, when, in fact, 44.6 per cent of applicants to Australian universities in 2015 were non-school leavers<sup>3</sup>. This adds the necessity to look beyond ATARs alone.

Whatever the means of selecting students for university study, the focus should be on assessing student capacity to succeed as openly and transparently as possible. University success and quality should be measured on the outputs and results of higher education, not raw entry scores.

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<sup>2</sup> Buly A. Cardak and Chris Ryan, 'Participation in Higher Education in Australia: Equity and Access', (2009) 85 (4) *Economic Record* 433 at 438

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2015*

## RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

***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.***

***Examples could include information about course prerequisites, ATAR cut-offs, other non-ATAR-related entry options or requirements, possible career pathways and qualification requirements, institution reputation, campus facilities, course cost, student peer cohort characteristics, family history or other connections to a particular institution, accreditation of a course by a professional body or association, graduate employment and earnings outcomes, student reviews or surveys of teaching quality, recommendations from friends or family.***

The most important pieces of information for all applicants are:

- Career outcomes – what does the course prepare students for at the end?
- Pathways – how can the course be used as a stepping stone or preparation for another course?
- Success rates – how many students successfully complete the course and are happy with their final outcome?
- Entry requirements – this includes ATAR but is not limited to it. Representation of entry requirements should include links to alternative pathways and special entry schemes.

Information for school leavers should be presented in a way that acknowledges the contribution of parents, guardians and career counsellors to the decision making process. This group needs to know that the applicant will have a good chance of success in their studies but may also need reassurance that the proposed studies will lead to an outcome (employment in most instances).

Mature age applicants need to be given sufficient information to be in a position to assess whether they have the capacity to undertake the course in question. They are also likely to place a higher importance on future employment outcomes and timeframes.

***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?***

The single most important piece of information for a school leaver is currently the published ATAR cut-off, however its use can be misleading. Explaining cut-offs is more easily done for highly competitive courses where it is based simply on the supply and demand of places. However where more elements are considered (for instance, bonus points), the explanation for applicants becomes more complex and confusing. A better term might be ‘entry score’, a concept which incorporates bonus point calculation and rankings for non-school leavers.

A voluntary opt-in scheme for universities could be introduced to improve the transparency of ATAR rankings and cut-offs. To ensure cut-offs are truly representative of the admissions criteria for a course, publication of an ATAR cut-off could be permitted only if a given proportion of students (for example 60 per cent) were admitted on the basis of the ATAR.

Where an ATAR cut-off was published, the higher education provider could be required to publish the proportion of students selected for a course on a non-ATAR basis.

For courses which admit between 20 per cent and 60 per cent of their intake on the basis of ATAR only and have a minimum number of students, a 'guide ATAR' (not cut-off) could be published.

Additionally, a uniform 'ATAR plus' model should be adopted, whereby the published cut-off is an adjusted 'entry score' which is the ATAR achieved by students after the inclusion of all publicly declared bonuses. The published figure could be the lowest entry score upon which a student was selected into a course on the basis of the cut-off alone, excluding alternative entry schemes.

To improve transparency, cut-offs could also be adjusted for each offer round. This would mean that the final cut-off for a course could drop significantly and publicly as a result of second and later round offers, or that a course which had a cut-off in the first round would not have one in latter rounds if it dropped below the 60 per cent threshold.

In addition to entry scores, the median and range of ATARs for each course could be published, as well as the number of students offered a place via alternative entry schemes.

***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?***

Bonus Points serve several purposes, including to attract students who wouldn't normally study in a discipline (for example, women into engineering, men into teaching) and to assist equity groups or students who are disadvantaged.

The increasing competitiveness of admissions is making higher education institutions less transparent about their use of bonus points. There is currently insufficient and inconsistent information about the use of bonus points by higher education institutions.

To improve transparency, the application of bonus points should be standardised across institutions and applied consistently (ideally by the TACs). There could be agreement amongst institutions on broad issues such as the legitimate grounds for bonuses, the calculation of bonuses, the maximum addition of bonuses and the legitimate types of alternative entry schemes.

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

Institutions provide direct information on each offering at every opportunity, in most cases providing general information in the first instance, and information catered to specific groups or types of applicants as needed.

Given the nature of the demand driven system and the incentives for universities to now compete for students, universities will continue to use their own websites to differentiate their

course offerings. Greater consistency of the more generic information available through the TACs and consistent terminology and explanation of the data and information available would assist students to make better informed choices.

Consistency of terminology and information should not preclude institutions from having individual and diverse admissions procedures.

***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?***

This is a good option to improve transparency. The published figures could also include an 'entry score' for each course (ATAR plus bonus points), the range of ATARs for students who gained entry, and the number of students who entered via alternative pathways.

***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?***

A more national approach would assist mobility and, potentially, retention for students wishing to move interstate. However, as over 94 per cent of students attend university in their home state, a national TAC is unnecessary at this time. Greater consistency across the existing state-based TACs would provide significant national benefits for transparency, comparability, reporting and analysis.

A national schedule of equivalency standards could be used to rank non-school leaver qualifications and work experience to provide greater transparency in admissions criteria and consistency between states and between school leavers and non-school leavers.

***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?***

Much of the complexity around early, second round and forced offers is due to the perceived need to provide applicants with as many opportunities as possible to change their preferences throughout the application process (providing additional choice and flexibility).

The need for this additional flexibility may be negated somewhat through appropriate careers advice, improved access to information and greater transparency in admissions processes, which would assist students to make an appropriate choice in the first instance.

One approach may be to include early and second round offers in the published entry scores (as discussed above).

To improve flexibility, there is an argument for providing some offers continually (i.e. not within offer rounds) as applicants meet eligibility criteria. For more competitive courses in which universities want to assess a full pool of applicants against each other, offer rounds could be used.

***What information or enhancements do you think should be added to the Australian Government's [Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching \(QILT\)](#) website?***

Median ATARs, bonus points available and ATARs of students enrolled in courses could be included in the QILT website.

***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?***

Consistent terminology could be facilitated by TACs providing a clear set of agreed definitions. Consistent terminology should be applied to information held on TAC and university websites.

TACs could also offer a calculator for school leavers and non-school leavers to estimate their potential entry score as a guide to the application process.

Reporting requirements should be the same or similar if students apply via a TAC or directly with universities. Students should not be disadvantaged if they apply through either method – assessment should be the same and institutions should publish their assessment schedules.

A key enhancement would be a bonus point calculator to enable students to estimate what their entry score might be on the basis of the institution they want to study at, their prior studies, and personal circumstances. Any such calculator would have to be generic and information provided to students regarding its limitations, but greater awareness of bonus points would assist students to make the better informed course choices.

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

A standardised and transparent bonus points system with a maximum number of bonus points that could apply would greatly assist disadvantaged students in making course selections.

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

Applicants have difficulty understanding how the ATAR is calculated in the first place and this confusion is compounded when they then attempt to understand cut-offs. The effect of scaling and subject choices on the ATAR is also little understood. An ATAR calculator could be introduced to increase awareness of the impact of these factors.

Increasing the information available to applicants is useful, however it must be provided in such a way as to assist applicants understand how to interpret that information and apply it to their individual situation.