



TRANSPARENCY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS PROCESSES

SUBMISSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS PANEL

General Comments

Torrens University Australia and Laureate Australia & New Zealand endorse the review of the transparency of higher education admissions processes. We note that a clear distinction should be made between (a) reviewing the admissions processes themselves (including the use of specific selection tools such as the ATAR); and (b) reviewing the information made available about these processes. We take the scope of this review to be limited to the latter point, notwithstanding the reference to the Minister's concerns about "the capacity of some students to complete their courses" in the Context section of the consultation paper. Torrens/Laureate also takes the scope of this review to be limited to admission to undergraduate courses, with admissions processes for postgraduate coursework and higher degree research excluded.

Any initiatives that would enhance the information about university admissions processes available to prospective students, and reduce uncertainty, are to be welcomed. The decisions prospective students make in reliance on this information can have significant impacts on their life plans and outcomes. These decisions can also have substantial financial impacts, both in terms of students' private resources and the provision of public resources to support higher education. It is in the interests of students, higher education providers and the Federal Government for students to make decisions about applying for courses with as much information as possible. Ill-advised choices are rarely disastrous, but they can delay students finding the pathway that suits them best.

The scope of the present review appears to be limited to students applying through the state tertiary admissions centres (i.e. – domestic students and onshore international students who have completed secondary schooling in Australia). Torrens/Laureate is of the view that transparency of admissions processes for offshore international applicants needs to be considered alongside processes for domestic and onshore applicants. Admissions standards for different cohorts should be aligned and international applicants are as much in need of high quality information as domestic applicants. However, our responses to the questions below largely refer to applicants using the state tertiary admissions centres.

In our view, there are two major issues that compromise the information available to prospective students when applying for higher education courses:

1. The complexity and diversity of admissions processes across Australia.
2. An over-emphasis on ATAR cut-offs.



The present review has the potential to address both of the issues, and more specific comments are provided in our response to the questions below.

Responses to Questions

Question 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. 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.

It is very difficult to generalise about how prospective undergraduate students make decisions. These decisions are highly individual and usually influenced by a range of interrelated factors. The factors that are most important for school-leaver applicants may be quite different to those considered by non-school-leaver applicants. The majority of applicants from both cohorts have their options drastically limited by a desire to stay in their home states. Geographical and cultural factors in Australia tend to make it less likely than in some other countries that people will move cities in order to attend a particular institution.

Within this constraint, our experience suggests that school-leavers are highly focused on perceived career outcomes for courses. They will be interested in data on recent graduates, including starting salaries and employment rates, as well as a course's professional accreditation status and reputation within relevant industries/professions. Perhaps to a lesser degree, school-leaver applicants may be influenced by campus facilities and resources, learning platforms and availability of learning support. Some are guided by recommendations from family, friends and teachers/careers advisers, or by institution reputations and/or firsthand experience of institutions at events such as Open Days and expos. Non-school-leaver applicants consider similar factors when choosing a course, possibly with less weight attached to career outcomes and more emphasis on campus facilities and flexible learning.

Applicants are also influenced by what they know about course entry standards. Many Year 12s will estimate their likely ATAR based on their school performance and apply for courses accordingly. Some students will not even bother considering high cut-off courses because they assume they won't achieve the published ATAR and are unaware of opportunities for admission below the cut-off, including access and equity schemes. On the other hand, students who expect to achieve high ATARs sometimes specifically target institutions and courses with high cut-offs on the grounds that hard-to-get-into courses must be more prestigious. The implicit use of ATAR cut-offs to signal course quality and/or reputation has long been a concern. Applicants would be better off focusing on other measures, such as student satisfaction ratings and graduate outcomes, to assess course quality.



Anecdotal evidence suggests that schools may sometimes have a tendency to reinforce the over-emphasis on ATARs, and school careers advisers may not always provide comprehensive and objective advice to year 12 students. It is in some schools' interests to focus on the ATAR as a measurable indicator of the quality of education provided by the school. Other factors affecting ATARs, including students' innate aptitudes and their socioeconomic backgrounds, are downplayed.

School careers advisers bring particular biases and preferences to the advice they provide. It is very difficult for them to provide information about the full range of career and study options to students, and to get to know individual students well enough to tailor advice effectively. Advisers will often over-simplify students' needs and hone in on specific perceived characteristics ('high academic performer', 'creative', 'arts rather than science-oriented', etc) when providing advice. Advisers can also be 'captured' by particular institutions, focus too heavily on prestige or branding factors, emphasise specific career outcomes over other benefits of study (including generic or soft skills), and be unwilling to investigate options 'outside the box'.

For significant groups of applicants, ATARs are irrelevant. These groups include international students (other than those who complete secondary schooling in Australia), school-leavers not intending to apply for university entrance, and applicants applying on the basis of alternative entry pathways. School-leavers who are applying on the basis of ATAR would benefit from greater awareness and transparency of alternative and flexible entry pathways as many later find themselves wishing to transfer courses or institutions.

The following shifts may help applicants across all cohorts make better decisions about the courses and institutions they apply for:

- Reduced emphasis on ATAR cut-offs; more information about opportunities for admission below cut-off points.
- Reduced emphasis on ATAR as the standard pathway to higher education; more information about alternative entry pathways.
- Encouraging students (especially school-leavers) to consider a wider range of factors in making their choices; less emphasis on prestige/institutional reputation and specific career outcomes; more emphasis on options suited to individual needs and development of transferable 'soft' skills.

Question 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?

As described above, published ATAR cut-offs shape the expectations of some school-leavers about the career and study options that are open to them, or that they 'should be' pursuing. For example,



some applicants may apply for arts instead of law because they assume they will not meet the ATAR cut-off, while other applicants who would be better suited to arts apply for law so as not to 'waste' the high ATAR they expect to achieve. Even where students are aware of possibilities for admission to courses below the ATAR cut-offs, they may see the ATAR as a proxy measure of how difficult a course is and be concerned about whether they could cope with it.

The admission of large numbers of students below ATAR cut-off points, and on the basis of non-ATAR pathways, is generally not well understood. The process of ranking applicants and offering down the list until the desired number of offers are made (at which point the ATAR cut-off is identified) is also poorly understood, as are the circumstances under which offers are made below the cut-off. There is still a tendency to see the previous year's ATAR cut-off as more than just a guide, which can lead to disappointment if the ATAR goes up. It would be helpful if applicants more clearly understood that relevant factors such as the number and calibre of applicants, and the number of places offered, can vary from year to year.

There is often a lack of transparency around how applicants with non-ATAR pathways are compared to ATAR applicants and factored in to the ranked lists. For example, it is not clear whether or how STAT results and GPAs from prior study are 'converted' to ATAR equivalents. It is rare for applicants to be provided with specific guidance about how personal statements, portfolios, auditions, interviews, etc are assessed and used in the selection process, especially when combined with ATAR scores or non-ATAR academic results. There can similarly be a lack of transparency around the assessment of access and equity applications, including whether attempts are made to quantify the impact of disadvantage and effectively adjust applicants' ATARs accordingly. If institutions were willing to publish more information on these matters, applicants would have a better basis for appropriate decision-making. In particular, more information for applicants applying on grounds other than ATAR would be helpful.

Question 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?

More information for applicants about how any adjustments to raw ATARs are made would greatly assist with transparency and applicant decision-making. Even where information is available, it can be difficult to interpret. The diversity of practices across institutions makes it harder to convey information effectively, and in some cases there is little justification for this diversity.

Torrens/Laureate would support the standardisation of bonus points rules in relation to factors causing disadvantage. It is hard to see why the same set of circumstances should result in different adjustments depending on the course or institution considering the application. However, there should still be scope for institutions to deploy their own access strategies.



Question 4. Is there sufficient knowledge of the range of alternative admissions procedures employed by higher education institutions? Examples could include 'early' offers on the basis of previous year's cut-off or school recommendations.

Our impression is that understanding of the range of alternative admissions schemes across Australia, among both prospective applicants and school careers advisers, is patchy. Some advisers may have sound knowledge of schemes at institutions in their home states, but much more limited understanding of options for students who are open to moving states or studying online. It is not helpful that there is such a diversity of schemes and practices in place across Australia's higher education providers, but achieving greater consistency is unlikely because institutions often use these kinds of schemes as points of difference and marketing tools.

Torrens/Laureate supports the transparent and accessible publication of practices in this area by individual institutions. It may also be possible for tertiary admissions centres to present information for applicants in a clearer and more targeted way. For example, they could collate relevant information under separate FAQ-style web pages such as 'Are you interested in early offers?', 'Are you eligible for bonus points?', 'Is your ATAR lower than expected?', etc.

Question 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?

Making this information available to applicants would assist with transparency and optimal decision-making. It would help to break down the 'mystique' surrounding ATAR cut-offs, demonstrating to applicants that the ATAR is not the only pathway to further study, and there are opportunities available to those who for one reason or another do not achieve high ATARs. The information breakdown would need to be by course to be of greatest assistance to applicants. It would be useful for each course to state (from the previous year):

- The proportion of offers made above the ATAR cut-off, on the basis of raw ATAR.
- The proportion of offers made above the ATAR cut-off, on the basis of adjusted ATAR.
- The proportion of offers made below the ATAR cut-off.
- The proportion of offers made on the basis of non-ATAR entry pathways (STAT, prior university study, TAFE study, etc).

However, creating unduly onerous reporting requirements for institutions should be avoided and in some cases this information will be of limited value to applicants' decision-making. For courses with small intakes, data may not be particularly meaningful. Lack of understanding of the different entry pathways and ATAR-adjustment mechanisms would also limit how useful the data were for applicants.

Question 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?



Although university students' mobility is limited in Australia compared to some other countries, there is potential for it to increase and it should be facilitated in any way possible. The current state-based approach does not adequately cater for either cross-state mobility or distance education programs. Torrens/Laureate offers many online courses and considers its domestic student catchment area to extend nationwide rather than being restricted to South Australia. To date, we have operated a direct entry admissions process for applicants from across Australia, but the school-leaver market is very focused on applying through tertiary admissions centres and this message is reinforced by schools.

Torrens/Laureate supports the concept of a national admissions centre where it complements direct local entry opportunities. We do not support all entry – including non-traditional - going through such a centre. With this caveat, a national centre would make it easier to streamline information and processes for applicants, and encourage greater consistency in practice across institutions where appropriate. It would be easier for institutions which draw from broad catchment areas, and facilitate mobility for domestic students. It is difficult enough for applicants to negotiate their way through one state's tertiary admissions process, let alone several if they wish to apply for courses in different states.

Question 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?

These mechanisms are complex and can create difficult choice architecture for applicants, though their purpose is often to maximise opportunities and options for applicants. Streamlining of processes and greater consistency of practice across the sector would be beneficial. For the sake of transparency, information about these mechanisms should be freely available to applicants despite the complexity. In particular, early entry/pathways schemes need to be very explicit and transparent and the timing of these processes should be made clear.

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

Torrens/Laureate believes the QILT website provides information that is potentially of great interest to applicants. It would be particularly helpful for applicants to have ready access to information about graduate outcomes and course satisfaction levels while they are making their course selections, as long as it is clear that these indicators are not related to admission standards. It would be particularly helpful for applicants to have ready access to information about graduate outcomes and course satisfaction levels while they are making their course selections, as long as it is clear that these indicators are unrelated to admission standards. Support systems for students, measures relating to graduate levels, and employability of previous cohorts should be published in parallel and in easily accessible and understandable formats.



Information about admissions is complex and would be best housed on the tertiary admissions centre websites rather than added to QILT. However, visible links between tertiary admissions centre websites and QILT would be helpful for applicants interested in both course quality measures and admissions information. Expansion of QILT could most usefully focus on the inclusion of other qualification levels.

Question 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?

Tertiary admission centre websites and institution websites are the dominant sources of information about admissions for prospective applicants. Institutions should not be burdened with providing data for any additional information repositories. The most useful improvement for prospective applicants would be enhanced capacity to compare entry requirements and admissions standards at different institutions. This would be a matter for tertiary admission centre sites rather than individual institution sites. A single national tertiary admissions centre would assist applicants to make comparisons across Australia.

Site users should be notified that the information presented on tertiary admission centre sites is not an exhaustive list of all available course and provider options (due to the state-based nature of the sites and the fact that some institutions have direct undergraduate entry). Due to the diversity and complexity of practices, there are limits to the level of detail that tertiary admission centre sites can provide. Individual institutions have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring their admissions processes are transparently reflected on their own websites.

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

Torrens/Laureate believes that all students with a capacity to succeed in tertiary study should have the opportunity to do so, regardless of social or educational disadvantage. We are committed to making university education accessible for a diverse group of students, and view alternative (non-school-leaver) entry pathways as key to this objective. Many institutions have these pathways in place, but they are not always as visible as they could be. There is scope to improve the information and advice provided to prospective applicants, particularly around entry pathways that are not wholly ATAR-dependent. Institutions should enhance the transparency of the information they provide and schools will also have a key role to play in raising awareness of access opportunities for disadvantaged students.



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

Improved information provision by institutions and tertiary admissions centres, and enhancing the capacity of school careers advisers to provide tailored advice are key changes that would help in this area. Introducing a single, national tertiary admissions centre would make improving information provision much easier.