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Griffith University

Comments on the HESP Consultation Paper

The Transparency of Higher Education Admission Processes

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Introduction

Griffith University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Higher Education Standards Panel's Consultation Paper on the *Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes*.

Like all other public universities, Griffith receives applications for entry to undergraduate courses from a broad range of people with diverse educational experiences. Our domestic applicants typically include:

- Queensland school leavers (normally aged 16 – 18) from independent and state senior secondary schools in urban, regional and remote locations.
- Mature age applicants who may or may not have formal post-school educational qualifications.
- School leavers from interstate who apply through QTAC and the Universities Admissions Centre –UAC.

General comments

The Higher Education Standards Panel proposes ten principles to improve transparency and thereby enhance the clarity, reliability and relevance of publicly available information about institutions' admission policies and processes. The paper argues that the availability of such information should enhance the quality of decision-making for applicants and make institutions accountable. With the conditional exception of Principle 7 in relation to a single data platform, Griffith agrees that these principles are an appropriate way to inform an approach these issues.

The need for transparency of information available to intending applicants is critical, and must be central to any regime that seeks to facilitate choices about options for entry to university courses that best suit individuals' interests and ambitions.

In this context we take 'transparency' to mean openness and clarity of admission policies and processes, and this would be supported through the adoption of a "best practice" approach. In 2004 the UK found itself addressing the same issues with which the Higher Education Standards Panel is now grappling and recommendations were provided in the form of the Schwartz Review "[Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice](#)". The legacy of that review is a revised QAA [Quality Code of Practice on Admissions](#), more centralised admission decision-making within institutions and the [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions](#) program. Adopting a "best practice" approach would be a useful model for institutions in Australia.

At the same time, we caution against over-reliance on centralised regulatory instruments that might produce a high degree of conformity, but at the risk of blurring the diversity that is a central feature of the Australian higher education sector.

In Queensland, a significant amount of information about admissions, bonus points, early offers, etc. is published either on the State TAC (QTAC) site or individual universities' websites. It is uncertain

that a national website containing the same material would add value or simply add another layer of complexity to the choices and decisions confronting applicants.

We note a recent report from a group of researchers at La Trobe (Andrew Harvey et al: *The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity*) who *inter alia* found that many disadvantaged students and those from regional areas may have a poor understanding of their post-school options in relation to higher education destinations, with reference particularly to Victoria and New South Wales. The report notes the volume and complexity of offer schemes available from many universities, and the difficulty that arises for students and school-based advisers in navigating this mass of information to enable students to make informed choices about post-school destinations.

In its introductory statement the Consultation Paper cites the reason for improving transparency in admissions processes to be the Minister's concern regarding the ability of some students to complete their degrees. This is a legitimate concern, but a focus on resources that maximise student retention and completion is also important. Similarly, as is noted in the IRU submission on the Consultation Paper, the focus should be on "...whether the applicant is capable of the course [rather than] the applicant's relative merit compared with other applicants..."¹

The Consultation Paper notes that less than half the students admitted in 2014 were accepted because of their secondary education results. This trend has been evident for some years and is no reflection on the characteristics or quality of the students who have gained admission other than that they may have been out of secondary school for a time or that they brought other indicators of likely success to the table.

In our experience school leavers achieving high secondary results/ATARS are just as likely as other students to transfer from one course at one institution to a different course at another institution, or within the same institution, during or at the end of their first year. Considering retention/completion requires focussing on students' overall trajectories and is likely to provide a more rounded picture of student decision-making with regard to their university course selection and ultimate success in higher education.

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.

The different types of course and admission information reflect current processes in Queensland high schools to guide post-school decision-making, and are ranked below in order of importance to school leavers' decision-making:

Course requisites (prerequisites, prior assumed and recommended) and other non-ATAR related entry requirements

¹ Innovative Research Universities *Improving the transparency of admissions decisions* (2016)

The choice of a university course is likely to be determined by a student's knowledge, interests and skills, and applicants will generally base their preference on senior secondary school subjects that provide the academic background required for that course. Queensland high school students undertake subject selection in year 9 for year 10 and in year 10 for their senior schooling. Secondary school guidance counsellors in Queensland are well provided with information about subject bonus ranks, early admission offers and alternative admission criteria, and use this to help guide year 10 subject selection. In Year 10, students develop a senior education and training (SET) plan to help them:

- set and achieve their learning goals in Years 11/12
- include flexible and coordinated pathway options in their course of senior study
- think about their education, training and career options after Year 12 and make decisions about learning pathways
- structure their learning around their abilities, interests and ambitions
- communicate with their parents, teachers and career guidance officers about their learning pathways and post-school plans.

Senior school students are encouraged to add a range of certifications to their learning account for recognition on the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE).

Griffith supports the Year 10 SET Plan process through its Uni-Reach program and the publication of the magazine *Griffiti*, which features stories from former Uni-Reach students studying at university and important information to assist students' decision making (e.g. costs and available assistance, pathway options). This resource is distributed free each year to all Year 10 students in Griffith's partner schools in southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales. Uni-Reach students in Years 11 and 12 can participate in school-based workshops where they work with Griffith University mentors who attended similar schools with similar study interests. These workshops aim to familiarise students with university life, expectations and pathway options.

ATAR/OP Cut-Off

Following year 10 subject selection, Queensland secondary schools provide predictions about likely success in senior secondary school subjects and the "Overall Position" (OP), particularly at the end of year 11 so that students may choose alternatives. Throughout year 12, students are guided by school staff to focus on listing preferences for university courses that fall within their band of predictions. These predictions are undertaken without factoring in bonus ranks or other institutional admission schemes.

Campus Offered, Cost and Campus Facilities

In some instances the OP or ATAR for the same course at different campuses of a university may differ slightly and this can be an important consideration in seeking admission to a course at a specific campus. Proximity to the family home, employment, student accommodation and transport are other key considerations.

iv. Possible career pathways/graduate employment opportunities and earnings and accreditation of course by a professional body or association

Throughout the senior secondary school years in Queensland, access to VET certificates, work experience and volunteering opportunities can assist students form their career preferences. Students are exposed to learning pathways, courses and institutions with help from experienced industry practitioners.

v. Institutional reputation, student peer cohort characteristics – where friends are going and recommendations of friends or family

In assessing an institution's reputation, students often rely on the recommendations of friends or family. Institutions also provide a range of outreach programs focused at different school leaver markets; examples at Griffith include the [GUESTS](#), [Uni-Reach & UniStart](#), [Science on the Go](#), [Griff Chem](#), [GO Health](#), [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation](#) programs. Equally, these programs provide the University with evidence about a school leaver's potential to complete a Griffith course.

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?

In our experience knowledge about the mechanisms for how OP/ATARs are calculated may not be highly significant in influencing an applicants' course and institution preferences, whereas knowledge about "cut-off" thresholds is important information for applicants who are constructing their TAC list of preferences. The Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority provides information on both the OP calculation <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/tertiary-entrance/op> and the ATAR <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/tertiary-entrance/atar>.

Nationally, information is available elsewhere regarding ATARs, for example:

- The New South Wales University Admissions Centre (UAC) provides a significant amount of information. <http://www.uac.edu.au/atar/>
- The ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies provides information on ATAR calculation and scaling. http://www.bsss.act.edu.au/information_for_students/scaling_and_the_ATAR

As noted above, there is already a significant amount of information available on either the TAC sites or sites for each State. States use different methods for calculating the ATAR, just as universities have distinctive philosophical and policy perspectives, so a single one site containing the information for all States could lead to less rather than more understanding about admissions. In reality, applicant behaviour is centred on a select and largely predictable number of institutions, primarily in local regions (with some discipline exceptions e.g. rural medicine at some universities, tropical science at James Cook, Antarctic science at UTAS). The value to an applicant residing, and intending to study in, Brisbane knowing the ATAR cut-off of a course at Curtin or La Trobe is likely to be of marginal interest at best.

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?

The Consultation Paper implies that forced and/or early offers, bonus points and special admission criteria are opaque and unregulated. Again like other universities, Griffith specifies the details of such admission schemes in its [Undergraduate Programs Admission Policy](#). We also publish information about bonus points - <https://www.griffith.edu.au/future-students/high-school-students/bonus-entry-options>.

The University's admissions policy states that Griffith:

- takes account of specific achievements related to particular fields of endeavour;
- provides access to persons who have experienced educational or social disadvantage and to address the under-representation of specific community groups in university education; and
- serves its communities, including the residents of the region in which the University is located.

In terms of admissions policies, there is an important distinction between uniformity (e.g. applying common bonus points across institutions) and benchmarked practice which provides for autonomy and difference, and which is currently enabled through TAC engagement. In Queensland these admission schemes are communicated by TACs and institutions directly to high schools. UAC also provides a range of information on bonus points with links to the bonus points offered by a range of universities. <http://www.uac.edu.au/atar/bonus-points/subject-bonuses.shtml>

Experience has guided the development of these admission schemes and their application in accordance with protocols endorsed and published by TACs. These are consistent with HES 2015 Standard 2.2 with its focus on the creation of equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of students' backgrounds, within a relevant policy framework, and consistent with the provider's mission.

On the basis of Griffith's experience over many years, each of these admission schemes has intrinsic logic and defensibility based around equivalence (forced/early offers), alternative evidence and testing (special admission criteria) and selective and benchmarked affirmative action (bonus points).

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.

As noted above, Griffith provides information on alternative admissions procedures to schools and pathway providers through our [Undergraduate Programs Admission Policy](#) and website. These admission procedures are managed by the University as direct admissions and provide a streamlined process for the applicant and, in many instances, the applicant is saved the cost of applying through the TAC.

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?

Subject to a proviso that such a report would not increase the regulatory and reporting burden, this could benefit applicants and the general public. HES 2015 7.2 requires the public disclosure of a range of information, aimed largely at enabling applicants to make informed choices.

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?

At Griffith, 18% of the 2016 offers were made to students from outside of Queensland via QTAC and UAC. The majority of these attend the Gold Coast campus, which is an easy commute for students living in northern New South Wales, and there is a sizeable cohort from Victoria and elsewhere preferencing Griffith programs through both QTAC and UAC. The data indicates that state-based TAC arrangements and university websites generally cope adequately with students' desire for information when they want to study interstate.

It is unclear how a national system for managing applications would increase mobility. The Australian Bureau of Statistics in its 2011 [Hitting the Books – Characteristics of Higher Education Students](#) found that 60% of students were aged between 15 and 24 years of age and that there was an increase in those living with their parents. This indicates that mobility is less of an issue for higher education applicants and that state TACs are responding to demand.

A national TAC to manage all admissions, policies, rules and procedures for tertiary entrance in Australia would be a massive undertaking. There would involve substantial system infrastructure, personnel and training, and developing, monitoring and enforcing compliance would be costly and intrusive.

While we have no objection in principle to the idea of a central repository of admissions information voluntarily provided by each university, it would duplicate what Universities and TACs already provide on their own websites and in their public and private communications with intending applicants. Griffith would support an agreement by universities to make their information available against benchmarked practice to aid understanding and comparison.

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?

Tertiary applicants have access to a variety of information sources about early offers, second round offers and forced offers, although as noted in the La Trobe study the sheer variety and complexity of this information can be a barrier to understanding. QTAC does include in its dictionary a definition of an 'offer' and an 'offer round'. QTAC provides a [Year 12 PowerPoint Presentation](#) that has information on applying, choices, preferences, key dates, and offer rounds.

Universities are openly accountable for their admission decisions and academic standards and routinely respond to requests for review of and appeals in relation to admission decisions and policies. Transparency of information available to applicants in the first place through the adoption of a best practice model would undoubtedly help in this process.

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?

This information is already available on both TAC and universities' websites. Intending students look for information on programs offered in the study area in which they are interested on TAC websites, where they can compare information from relevant universities and tertiary providers in their State on ATAR/OP cut-offs, prerequisites, etc., or obtain information about a particular university's programs on its website.

With regard to the QILT website, see comments in Question 8 above. The Study Assist website only provides information on the financial assistance available to students once they commence at university. The site has no admissions information and is not designed for that purpose.

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

The Queensland TAC administers the Educational Access Scheme (EAS) on behalf of member and participating institutions. Representatives of tertiary institutions collaboratively developed the EAS scheme, along with the six categories and assessment measures. The scheme is centralised and managed by QTAC, which assesses EAS applications for all participating institutions against the same criteria in a consistent and comparable way. As the scheme is centralised, applicants only need to submit their EAS application once and tertiary institutions do not have to individually assess large numbers of applications. The EAS categories are:

- Financial Hardship
- Home Environment and Responsibilities
- English Language Difficulty
- Personal Illness and Disability
- Educational Disruption

Eligible applicants are awarded bonus OPs or Ranks to a maximum specified by each institution to improve their chances of receiving an offer and this enables the achievement levels of disadvantaged applicants to be measured fairly against the achievement levels of more advantaged applicants. This scheme is included in Griffith's [Undergraduate Programs Admission Policy](#). Griffith has some other admission documents directed at particular applicants and programs e.g. [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander: First People Selection and Admissions Guidelines for Griffith Health programs](#).

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

It would be useful for the sector and for intending students, their families and school-based student advisers if information was made available by universities in an easily accessible way, noting that underlying policy frameworks and admissions processes are clearly a matter for individual institutions to determine. If admission policies across the sector addressed the same issues, it would

facilitate applicant and wider public understanding. Admission policies should be written in plain English, reviewed regularly and reflect institutional best practice. Institutions that do not provide clear and consistent information to potential students would face the consequences of a competitive market.