

**SUBMISSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS
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ADMISSIONS PROCESSES**

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**IDEAS FOR IMPROVING
TERTIARY ADMISSIONS
IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER
EDUCATION**

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ENQUIRIES

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Introduction

We thank the Higher Education Standards Panel for their interest in our recent research into the adaptation of Australian tertiary admissions (Harvey, Brett et al. 2016) and opportunity to discuss the implications of the research with the panel. The following submission is provided in response to the challenge set by the Higher Education Standards Panel during our discussion. We interpret this challenge as providing practical policy advice and direction, informed by our recent research, but also drawing upon other research we have undertaken and our broader experiences of higher education.

We note in this submission that our research has also informed submissions provided to the Higher Education Standards Panel by La Trobe University and the Innovative Research Universities. This submission represents our own views in response to the challenge set by the Panel, rather than any formally agreed institutional position on the topic.

The challenge

The expansion of Australia's higher education system has occurred at a faster rate than which higher education policy, financing and regulation has been able to adjust. Tertiary admissions practices exemplify this misalignment, and intersect with historic practices across State controlled education systems and higher education sector institutions. The resulting admissions systems are overly complex, despite laudable reform attempts by Tertiary Admissions Centres and other stakeholders to streamline and simplify the system.

Tertiary Admissions Centres are core institutions of an admissions system that operates relatively efficiently and effectively. Our research reveals a significant shift in the orientation of Tertiary Admissions Centres and institutional admissions practices over recent years. Demand driven funding has led to greater competition for students, coinciding with an increased use of direct admissions at an institutional level and increasing customer service focus (encompassing both students and institutions) for Tertiary Admissions Centres.

These changes demonstrate that the system as a whole is adapting, and stakeholders are mindful of the need for academic standards, fairness and efficiency. There is no evidence of objectionable VET-FEE HELP style rorting. Nonetheless, with increasing diversity of admissions has come increasing opacity, and a consequent potential for inequity.

Our advice to the Panel is grounded in the view that many of the problems evident in tertiary admissions have roots in inequality evident in Australian schools. These inequalities feed into the limitations of ATAR and its correlation with social class. Despite its limited use as a sole entry criterion, ATAR imposes a strong influence over the entire admissions system, including opaque bonus point schemes and admission of non-school leavers.

The admissions system cannot be improved without recognising the importance of student equity. The recognition of equity must also acknowledge interactions and trade-offs with other important dimensions of the admissions process, particularly: transparency; efficiency; predictive validity, and accountability. The following recommendations seek to translate these principles into actionable policy reforms.

Ideas for improving tertiary admissions in Australian higher education

- 1) *Encourage higher education institutions to develop consistent, agreed, and transparent equity bonus point allocations through their state-based Tertiary Admissions Centres, following the example of SATAC. Calibrate and refine equity bonus points according to systematic analysis of relationships between achievement in preparatory studies, achievement in higher education, and the quantitative measures of educational disadvantage. The recognition of educational disadvantage should endeavour to have equivalence for school leaver, non-school leaver, Admissions Centre and Direct applications and across all bases for admission.*

Equity bonus points (as opposed to subject and other bonus points) are designed to compensate for educational disadvantage. That disadvantage is real and it demonstrably affects achievement. Providing compensation for disadvantage is therefore an important and valuable equity principle of admissions. However, the current complexity, opacity and evidential weakness of equity bonus point allocations has led some stakeholders to advocate their abolition altogether. We believe compensation is necessary, but there is a rising need for reform to instil greater confidence in the use of bonus points for evidence-based compensation, rather than any other pragmatic institutional purpose.

This recommendation therefore necessitates better systems and processes for standardised approaches to documenting, linking and reporting data on achievement in preparatory studies, achievement in higher education and measures of educational disadvantage. We understand that the Department is investing additional funds in the establishment of a DataMart, and that additional resources have been directed to QILT in the recent Commonwealth budget. A priority in this investment should be to review and refine admissions and equity related data elements to allow for better cross matching and reporting with subsequent performance in higher education.

This recommendation confronts challenges in the degree to which autonomous institutions can be encouraged to approach admissions practices in collaborative ways. SATAC may prove to be an anomaly unless a relevant policy lever is introduced to encourage this collaboration. Potential policy levers include integrating consideration of Bonus Points as an element of the TEQSA Risk Framework, or establishing new conditions of funding within the Higher Education Support Act to comply with new admissions guidelines. We favour a mechanism that ties admissions accountability to funding, although recognise that legislative reform is harder to achieve.

It is also worth noting that many institutions award subject bonus points that, while well-meaning, potentially counteract the effect of equity bonus points. Subject bonus points are often awarded to school leavers who enrolled in subjects such as advanced level mathematics and foreign languages. Yet our recent report into Globalisation and student equity highlights that school foreign language enrolments, for example, are correlated with high socio-economic status. Students in urban areas, and from high SES schools, are more likely to be offered, and to enrol in, a foreign language subject. Our report found that while the average Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) is 1,000, 'the average ICSEA of schools that did not teach a language at all was approximately 963, compared to an average ICSEA of 1025 for schools that provided access to four or more foreign languages.' (Harvey et al. 2016, p.38). Similarly, Victorian data revealed that over 70 per cent of the schools which did not provide any foreign language study were from regional areas. The hierarchy of the school curriculum has been well-documented by Richard Teese and others. Subject bonus points can exacerbate inequity if applied without qualification.

- 2) *Encourage greater promotion of the TAC educational access schemes to secondary schools, given widespread confusion and the evident current failure of many eligible applicants to apply for compensation for educational disadvantage.*

The tertiary admissions landscape is becoming more complex, although remains more streamlined than many higher education systems where there are no centralised admissions mechanisms. We acknowledge the view expressed during our discussions about the problems associated with this complexity. However, we also maintain that compensation for educational disadvantage is valid and indeed necessary for an equitable admissions system. Ensuring that students have knowledge of available compensation therefore requires a reduction in complexity, but also active promotion to students, parents and stakeholders who often have relatively low levels of knowledge about higher education admissions.

It is important in our view that mechanisms remain in place that support disadvantaged students to better understand university and support them through the application process. The Higher Education Participation and Partnership Programme is partly designed to fulfil this function, and a forthcoming review will assess the efficacy of the Programme against this objective. There is scope for this Programme, and school based careers advice programmes, to be more focused on supporting students at critical junctures in decision making process that influence their admission to higher education.

- 3) *Encourage institutions to coordinate principal recommendation/early offer schemes centrally through their tertiary admissions centre, following the model first adopted by UAC.*

There are inefficiencies and inequities associated with the need for disadvantaged students to make multiple direct applications to different universities. The UAC model streamlines principal recommendation/early offer schemes and provides an efficient model that reduces the administrative burden on students and schools.

A challenge facing policy reform in this domain is the extent to which interactions between admissions centres and higher education providers can be regulated by TEQSA or influenced by the Higher Education Support Act. Outcomes consistent with this recommendation could be achieved indirectly via the establishment of new guidelines for admissions in higher education that are associated as a condition of funding through the Higher Education Support Act.

- 4) *Publish demographic data on the outcomes of admissions processes, with a view to increasing transparency and highlighting potential courses of inequity and/or lack of diversity.*

The public interface of the higher education data collection is dispersed across multiple reports, spreadsheets and online repositories. There is unleveraged potential associated with better integrating this data to inform student selection decisions. The higher education market would operate more effectively if students were able to access the represented admissions criteria, admissions outcomes, social demography, learning and teaching, and graduate outcomes. At this stage only some of this data is available in a way that targets student decision-making, but more can and should be done to progress

the transparency agenda. We see great potential for including equity indicators in the QILT framework, both to provide students with a sense of the cohort with which they may be likely to be part of, but also to refocus the attention of institutions to the social composition of their student body.

- 5) *Commission further research, including using existing tertiary admission centre databases, to provide evidence on the effectiveness and predictive validity of different Bases of Admission.*

Recommendation 1 notes the need to better document, link and report information relevant to admissions processes. This is a necessary pre-condition for research into the relationships that exist across achievement pre and post admission and indicators of educational disadvantage that can inform standardised approaches to assessment of academic potential and recognition of educational disadvantage. Compensation of educational disadvantage should be determined based on robust and longitudinal evidence. Equally, the validity and effectiveness of the increasingly diverse Bases of Admission could be interrogated through longitudinal data, much of which is already held by the TACs.

- 6) *Encourage specific promotion strategies for mature age students, given many mature age students are unaware of their ability to make applications through tertiary admission centres or access scholarships and other benefits made available to school leaver applicants.*

The interests of mature age entrants to higher education are often seen as secondary to those of school leavers, yet mature age people comprise nearly half of all applicants. There is scope to bolster the consideration of mature age students as an element of the TEQSA Risk Framework, particularly in institutions with a high proportion of non-school leaver applicants. Mature age applicants, who are often direct entry applicants, should be able to apply for educational disadvantage according to the same criteria as school leavers, and assessed on the same basis. Equally, better demographic data and more robust evidence would enable us to disaggregate the 'mature age' admissions cohort into more meaningful categories of analysis.

- 7) Develop a clear and readable 'guide to university admissions', designed for parents and other stakeholders. The guide should explain the nature of tertiary admissions centres, ATARs, and other Bases of Admission, and contain information that precedes the more detailed information often provided by TAC and institutional websites.

Our research revealed markedly different opinions on the accessibility of information made available through the admissions process. Complex forms and publications are often perceived as streamlined and engaging by universities and admissions centres, but as hard to comprehend and navigate by students, careers teachers and parents. In particular, we found that low SES and regional students have less awareness of the admissions process than their counterparts, and are often unlikely to access and navigate a tertiary admissions centre website. If QILT is to take on an extended role in communicating more information relevant to admissions and outcomes, we encourage significant investment in user testing and feedback which is representative of the target groups, including the identified equity groups.

References

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