

Higher Education Standards Panel consultation:
*Transparency of Higher Education
Admissions Processes*



May 2016

**Response from
the Australian Council for Educational Research**

Overview

This document has been prepared by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in response to the Higher Education Standards Panel's Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes. In developing the document, ACER has drawn on previous experience working in admissions research and admissions testing, and on discussions over time with universities in Australia as a result of this work relating to the issues of relevance to this consultation.

ACER is a not-for-profit educational research organisation. Established in 1930, ACER researchers engage in a diverse range of issues relating to education from early childhood to vocational and workplace education. ACER has substantial capabilities in the higher education sector through its research work (across policy, surveys and assessment) as well as its development and delivery of admissions assessments. Our independence from universities and government, and the diverse range of experience in admissions through research projects and the provision of assessments, place ACER in a unique position to offer insight to the Panel.

This document explores four key areas identified by ACER as critical to improving the admissions processes of higher education providers in Australia. In developing this document, we have approached 'transparency' as a concept manifesting two specific ideals in relation to the issues of the consultation. We see transparency in admissions as both a means of ensuring public and stakeholder confidence in the quality of processes for enrolling students as well as a tool that can be used by providers to clearly articulate their academic expectations of students who are admitted for study.

The observations made in this document assume that, as the revised Higher Education Standards come into effect in January 2017 and in reaction to the intensity of scrutiny on admissions through the media in early 2016, higher education providers will be taking substantially more notice of their procedures, assurance of standards, and ongoing monitoring and improvement of processes in admissions over coming years.

Observations

1. Use of multiple admissions tools is better than reliance on single metrics

Research conducted by ACER over the past decade in a range of higher education settings has consistently demonstrated that using multiple tools for determining the appropriateness of applicants for study in a certain course is more effective than reliance on only one (Coates, Edwards, & Friedman, 2010; Edwards, 2015; Edwards, Coates, & Friedman, 2012; Edwards, Friedman, & Pearce, 2013).

The implication from this evidence is that over-reliance on any one metric – be it the ATAR, an admissions test, or any other tool – will inevitably lead to reduced quality in admissions processes. The use of two or three well-developed metrics for assessing applicants can offer vastly more information to providers in making decisions. The use of a number of tools in admissions has been demonstrated relatively effectively in the area of medical admissions – where selection on an achievement metric alone (e.g. ATAR, or GPA) is rendered almost impossible given the ‘perfect scores’ of many applicants. As such, implementing an aptitude test, calibrated to differentiate between very high achievement levels, alongside an interview is a method of admissions with proven benefits for these highly contested places (Edwards, Friedman, et al., 2013; Mercer, Crotty, Alldridge, Le, & Vele, 2015).

While the medical admissions context is vastly different from many others within a university, the point remains that the practice of using multiple tools in an admissions process does exist and research suggests this constitutes best practice within Australian higher education.

Research on the use of multiple selection tools in admissions outside of the health sciences has also demonstrated the potential strength of such an approach from a quality assurance perspective and from an equity perspective. A study funded by the Australian Government through the then Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and undertaken between 2007 and 2010 explored the use of the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) and the UniTEST within a number of universities in Australia. The report from the study (Coates et al., 2010) and subsequent analyses exploring equity perspectives (Edwards, Coates, & Friedman, 2013) showed that using more than one measure in admissions systems could improve the opportunities of underrepresented groups of students gaining admissions while maintaining a quality threshold on the admissions process. An example of how these tests were used within institutions was that applicants with lower than acceptable prior achievement as indicated through the ATAR would supplement their application by undertaking an aptitude test that could help the university identify sufficient competence in areas of interest that were not apparent through the ATAR.

Clearly, there are implications with widening the number of metrics used in an admissions process. These can be practical (when are the non-achievement metrics recorded? Who pays?), technical (how are they used effectively to improve the process?), and perhaps even commercial (if University A has only the ATAR as a tool

and University B asks students uses a second metric as well as the ATAR, might students avoid University B?). These kinds of issues have prevented the wider adoption of multiple metrics in the past. However, none are insurmountable and by tackling these issues and assisting universities in implementing such a change and communicating with applicants about such a change, there is a real potential for improving admissions processes.

2. The strengths and limitations of selection tools need be better understood

Recent discussions with the higher education sector, both with providers individually and in a Forum held by ACER in October 2015, have highlighted the fact that many institutions are not familiar with the different admissions tools available. In addition to this, of the tools that are used, there is some uncertainty about the best way to use them.

The example in the Panel’s paper of adding ‘bonus points’ to the ATAR is one case where approaches appear to be incongruent. In our own work, we have seen the scores of applicants from admissions tests used in ways that were unintended and inconsistent with the purpose for which the tools were developed.

There is an important need for up-to-date, objective research to be undertaken that explores a range of tools currently used in selection for higher education (ATAR, aptitude tests, interview approaches, folio assessment, etc.), documents their design and intended purpose, explores their current usage and provides clear guidelines for higher education providers in how best practice might be applied in using these tools.

While the ATAR has been shown to correlate with completion or achievement in university at least to a certain extent (Coates et al., 2010; Dobson & Skuja, 2005; Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Pitman et al., 2015), its current use as a single metric for selection can be problematic. In the past when competition for university was more intense due to capped places, the ATAR (or ENTER, UAI, TER etc.) offered a useful tool in being able to identify and select-in relatively high-performing candidates. At the upper levels (i.e. approximately 80 and above), it was established that there were relatively high success rates (Dobson & Skuja, 2005).

However, the current setting of higher education finds substantially more providers attempting to differentiate applicants for selection into courses on ATARs that are very much in the middle-range. Because the ATAR relies on an aggregate of unrelated variables it provides no defensible way of comparing students in the mid-range. If we test three students in three different subjects, giving each a mark out of five, our results might look like this:

	Mathematics	Psychology	Theatre Studies	Aggregate Score
Student A	0	5	5	10
Student B	5	5	0	10
Student C	3	3	4	10

The aggregate score tells us these students are identical, but in reality they are clearly different. The ATAR was designed in a context where students were competing for places: in that context we are considering the top of the scale where students did well at everything. However, in a demand driven context where universities are competing for students, the ATARs under consideration are well into a range where they provide little valid comparison between candidates.

Yet it remains *perfectly feasible to match each of these students with tertiary courses that play to their strengths*, if we can get past the aggregate and instead match the components of the aggregate with appropriate courses. The secondary school sector already provides the data we need to do this. In a demand-driven system it does not make sense to mash all of that data into one “magic number” that destroys the information it contains. In our experience this problem with aggregate scoring is not confined to the ATAR but frequently arises when institutions attempt to improve admissions by considering additional variables. Those variables might be valid and useful, but the way they are frequently converted onto a single scale is not.

Ensuring the metrics used in selection are used correctly would offer a substantial step in improving transparency in admission systems. This could be done by ensuring clear evidence-based research is developed to investigate:

- the application of ‘bonus points’ to ATARs;
- the feasibility of applying ‘study-scores’ of particular subjects in secondary school to the selection process;
- the way in which aptitude test outcomes can be segmented to appropriately target potential abilities in different areas (e.g. literacy or numeracy); and
- best practice use of other metrics for selection.

If higher education providers are clear on the types of selection tools available, the situations in which they are best used and the ways in which they can be ordered, sorted and filtered to compare the capacity of applicants, the selections they make are more likely to be transparent. This will potentially lead to the choice of candidates most appropriate to the expectations and requirements of the course.

3. National statistics collections could be refined to collate useful data relating to admission

There is potential to collect more thorough information through the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) HEIMS reporting system that would enable more specific information to be available about admissions.

The Panel’s consultation paper uses the only consistently collected variable relating to admission means that is available from the national Higher Education Statistics Collection – that is the ‘Basis of Admission’ variable. In our experience using this data, while the current ‘Basis of Admission’ variable offers some interesting insights, it is limited in the detail it offers. For example, in the pie chart (Figure 1) presented in the Panel’s paper, more than one quarter of all commencing students in 2014 were admitted on a basis for which there is almost no useful information (13 per cent with ‘Other basis’; and 13 per cent ‘Secondary education without ATAR’). The ability to derive evidence-based insights into the trends in admissions from this national-level

full-population data is limited by this. But it need not be the case. The HEIMS tool is an effective and efficient means for collecting important data and by updating this variable, or adding supplementary variables, its use as a tool for the monitoring of trends in admissions could be vastly improved.

Considered consultation and a careful approach to development of variables in this regard would be necessary to get this right. However, as a starting point, we believe a basic process for compiling information could operate using a hierarchy of variables that might begin with identifying whether the student was enrolled through a direct application to the institution or through a Tertiary Admissions Centre (TAC). It could then gather broad information about the mode of selection under each of these options, for example selection based on ATAR, and/or admissions test, and/or interview, and/or folio, and/or previous HE/VET course etc. A further level of data could be collected relating to the admissions processes that also took into account non-academic variables, such as equity categories.

In order to reduce the reporting burden, it would be prudent to include in any discussion of this, the feasibility of obtaining some of this information by linking data with the DET's Applications and Offers datasets collected annually from TACs and institutions.

Such information could be used alongside attrition and completion statistics in national reporting relating to higher education provision. As suggested in the Demand Driven Funding Review (Kemp & Norton, 2014), the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website offers an obvious vehicle for this kind of dissemination.

4. Building a strong selection process relies on articulating expectations of students and measuring against these expectations

An essential element in the admissions process that does not always appear to be clear in current practice is the existence of a link between the academic expectations relating to a particular degree, and the selection criteria used to choose applicants for that degree.

Careful mapping of the stipulated learning outcomes for each degree and the Graduate Learning Outcomes/Graduate Capabilities statements of the institution, with the information being used to select candidates, would offer institutions the ability to begin to more systematically identify gaps in admissions metrics. They could then seek appropriate ways of improving processes to strengthen selection. While this could be a potentially burdensome activity, if improvements in the means of selection lead to lower attrition and higher completion, the benefits of such overhauls to systems may outweigh the initial costs.

The observations made here are framed within the context of changes in higher education over the past decade which have substantially altered the way in which admissions policies are approached in many universities. The detail relating to the growth in enrolments and approaches to the Demand Driven Funding policy have been well documented elsewhere (Edwards & van der Brugge, 2012; Kemp &

Norton, 2014; Norton, 2013; Pitman, Koshy, & Phillimore, 2015). Without recounting these issues, it is important to highlight that in general we view the approach to university admissions as changing from one in which potential students were competing with each other for university places (Edwards, 2007, 2008a, 2008b), to one in which universities are competing with each other for potential students. As one Vice Chancellor recently put it, from a university perspective, the approach to admissions has changed from being a 'selector' to being a 'recruiter'.

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