

Fact sheet – Friday 11 December 2009

The ATAR and the university selection process

EACH year, around 40 000 NSW HSC students apply for tertiary study through the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC). For most courses, NSW HSC students are selected on their ATAR.

What is the ATAR and why do universities use it?

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a rank that measures a student's overall academic achievements in the NSW HSC in relation to that of other students. Because the ATAR is a rank, it allows the comparison of students who have completed different combinations of HSC courses. Universities need to rank students because generally there are more applicants for courses than there are places available.

Success at tertiary study depends on a variety of factors, including personal attributes such as ability and motivation, but an achievement measure like the ATAR has been found to be the best single predictor of success.

What happened to the UAI?

The ATAR replaced the Universities Admission Index (UAI) in June 2009. There were three changes:

- the name was changed
- the highest rank became 99.95 as opposed to 100 for the UAI
- the UAI indicated a student's position in relation to their Year 10 cohort; the ATAR now indicates a student's position in relation to their Year 7 cohort.

The Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC) decided to adopt a common name for existing ranks across all states and territories (except Queensland) to highlight that student ranks are reported on a common scale.

Who calculates and releases ATARs?

ATARs are calculated on behalf of the universities in NSW by the Technical Committee on Scaling – a committee set up by the NSW Vice Chancellor's Committee. ATARs are confidential and released by UAC to:

- students who have requested an ATAR and
- universities to which the students have applied.

They are not provided to the NSW Board of Studies or to schools.

For further information (media only) contact:

Lucie Parkin, Communications Officer, Universities Admissions Centre on (02) 9752 0775 or Kim Paino, Director Information Services on (02) 9752 0760 or 0409 155 112

How is the ATAR calculated?

To be eligible for an ATAR a student must satisfactorily complete at least 10 units of Board Developed courses for which there are formal examinations conducted by the Board of Studies. These courses are referred to as ATAR courses (and are categorised as either Category A or Category B courses). The ATAR courses must include at least eight units from Category A courses, two units of English, three courses of two units or greater, and at least four subjects.

The ATAR is based on an aggregate of scaled marks in 10 units of ATAR courses comprising the best two units of English and the best eight units from the remaining units, which can include up to two units of Category B courses.

Because HSC marks achieved in different courses cannot be compared, as doing so does not take into account the comparative difference between candidates in different courses, HSC marks are scaled before they are added to give the aggregate from which the ATAR is determined.

The scaling process takes the raw HSC marks provided by the Board of Studies and estimates what the marks would have been if all courses had been studied by all students. The scaling algorithm is designed to encourage students to take the courses for which they are best suited, and which best prepare them for their future studies. The underlying principle is that a student should neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged by choosing one HSC course over another.

Scaling modifies the mean, the standard deviation and the maximum mark in each course. Adjustments are then made to the marks of individual students to produce scaled marks, which are the marks the student would have received if all courses had the same candidature.

Although scaled marks are generally different from the raw marks from which they are derived, the ranking of students within a course is not changed. Scaled marks are not reported to students.

The scaling process is carried out afresh each year. It does not assume that one course is intrinsically more difficult than another or that the quality of the course candidature is always the same.

What is the relationship between the ATAR and the HSC?

The HSC and the ATAR have quite separate functions even though they are both based on the same course results.

The HSC is:

- a set of results that provides a profile of achievements across a range of HSC courses
- an exit certificate that marks the end of 13 years of schooling
- the gateway to further study and employment
- awarded and released by the Board of Studies.

The ATAR is:

- a rank which provides a measure of overall academic achievement in the HSC
- used by universities to rank and select applicants in an equitable way
- based on scaled marks, not HSC marks

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- calculated by the universities for all eligible candidates and released by UAC.

Do universities use selection criteria other than the ATAR?

While the ATAR may be the best single predictor of academic success, universities acknowledge that there are other selection criteria which are relevant to certain courses.

Universities may base their selection of students on an interview, audition, portfolio, questionnaire or test. Sometimes these selection criteria are used on their own and sometimes in conjunction with the ATAR.

What are bonus points and how do they relate to the ATAR?

Universities also allocate bonus points in certain circumstances. Examples include students with strong performance in relevant HSC subjects, students who live or attend school in an area defined by the university, and students who have applied for consideration through Educational Access Schemes (see below). Bonus points schemes are different for each university, and often for each course at the same university.

The allocation of bonus points means that a student may receive an offer to a course even though their ATAR is below the published cut-off.

Do universities give any consideration to students with long term educational disadvantage?

All universities have Educational Access Schemes (EAS) for students who have experienced long-term educational disadvantage. These schemes make provision for students whose studies have been disrupted by a variety of factors, such as illness of a family member or excessive carer responsibilities, or who are statistically under-represented in higher education.

Most universities allocate bonus points to eligible EAS applicants, which may allow those students entry into a course even though they have an ATAR below the published cut-off.

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