

Universities Admissions Centre (UAC)

SUBMISSION

Response to the Admissions Transparency
Implementation Working Group
Draft Implementation Plan

May 2017



Universities Admissions Centre

About us

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC) was established in 1995 and is the largest tertiary admissions centre in Australia. Owned by universities in NSW and the ACT, our mission is to provide excellence in admissions services and promote equity of access to tertiary education. Central to that mission is a strong culture of servicing the needs of all our stakeholders, in particular our institutions and applicants.

UAC has a trusted and valued position in the higher education sector. Applicants, in particular Year 12 students, turn to UAC for unbiased and authoritative information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface with which to apply. Institutions rely upon UAC services to handle the bulk of the admissions process, allowing them to focus on their core capabilities of learning and teaching, research and community engagement. Parents, schools, the media and the general public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

UAC is a member of the Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admission Centres (ACTAC), the group that facilitates communication and co-operation between tertiary admissions centres in Australia and New Zealand. UAC's Managing Director is the current Chair of ACTAC.



Executive summary

UAC is very supportive of the report of the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) on Improving the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions and welcomes the release of the consultation draft implementation plan.

UAC strongly endorses the plan's acknowledgment of the importance of this work to help students make better informed decisions about courses, which benefits not only the student, but also the sector, the government and the community. Like many in government and the sector, UAC is also hopeful that improved transparency will go at least some way towards addressing the rate of attrition from higher education and is keen to partner with Government and the sector on future initiatives in that area.

UAC believes that the use of the term "selection rank" can be promoted as a way forward, even in the short-term. Selection rank is transferrable across all types of applicants and all types of admissions. In the UAC system every applicant has a selection rank, and we have the capability to report that rank to applicants. The cut-off is the lowest selection rank (as opposed to the lowest ATAR) to gain entry into the course. There is an unfortunate tendency at the moment to use "ATAR" as an admissions catch-all, when in fact selection rank is more appropriate. ATAR is simply the base qualification for Year 12 applicants, and if we can educate the sector and the community about selection rank, this would greatly improve the transparency and understanding of higher education admissions. Selection rank is a holistic measure that encompasses all types of applicants and all types of admissions criteria, is a fairer and more equitable way of describing admissions, and UAC can progress the transparency of selection ranks to applicants in the short to medium term.

UAC broadly supports all six objectives of the plan, with specific endorsement of:

- UAC and other tertiary admissions centres developing and implementing improved reporting products.
- UAC and the other tertiary admissions centres working together to develop and implement a more streamlined approach to interstate applications.
- The provision of ATAR thresholds to prospective students that are inclusive and exclusive of bonus points. At the end of the day prospective students want to know what their own rank is and what rank is needed to gain entry.
- UAC is in favour of the development of a national admissions information platform and, while out of scope for the Implementation Working Group, UAC urges the Department of Education and Training to engage with UAC and other stakeholders when work begins on this project. While information is currently comparable within state borders, thanks to the work of UAC and the other admissions centres, there is a need for that to be extended so that information is comparable between states and across providers nationally. However, we note that the timeline of a pilot platform in December 2017 will only be achievable if other milestones around templates, terminology and thresholds have been achieved.
- UAC supports the reporting of the three subgroups of ATAR, ATAR plus other criteria and non ATAR for recent secondary students, and the inclusion of those with bonus points in the ATAR category, and also supports the reporting of offers made in all offer rounds. UAC also supports the reporting of the lowest ATAR to which an offer was made and the lowest selection rank (rather than lowest adjusted ATAR – see below) to which an offer was made.

Areas of concern include:

- The ambitious timelines proposed in the plan are at odds with UAC timelines for the 2018 admissions period. While we understand that the sector is to adopt a "best endeavours" approach for 2018 admissions, we are concerned with the objective of having agreed information sets that embody agreed terminology available on UAC's website by August 2017. UAC believes that this timeframe could be relaxed until October/November 2017 without detriment to prospective students who, even though they may have applied in August or September, still have time throughout October, November and indeed December to finalise their course preferences before results are released and the bulk of offers are made.
- The plan to use an initial set of common terms in August 2017 and then a final set of common terms in May 2018 may cause confusion if there are significant changes between the initial set and the final set. To maximise public confidence in this process there must be certainty around these terms from their first release.

- The use of “ATAR-related adjustment schemes/factors” or “adjusted ATAR” is problematic as ATARs are not adjusted under these schemes and what happens is that a student’s ATAR and other factors combine to give an overall selection rank for a particular course at a particular institution. The ATAR itself is unchanged and is then used as the base measure for other courses and institutions. For the same reason we do not support the use of the term “raw ATAR”.
- While the term “bonus points” may not convey the true spirit of how these schemes operate, the term is widely used and understood by prospective students and there is a risk of alienating the primary audience for the information when you abandon the terms used by that audience.
- Further on terminology, UAC does not support the use of “At school offer scheme” and would prefer “Early offer scheme” to retain existing, known terminology where possible.
- In the move towards a national admissions information platform it should not be forgotten that, at least in NSW and the ACT, most prospective students already source their information about courses and institutions from UAC, and if there is going to be information of the type already provided by UAC available on other platforms (either institutions or through the national platform), then that information must be consistent and must also be available through UAC.
- UAC has some concerns around the potential for further confusion among prospective students. At every stage of this process the Government has reinforced the need for the information and approach to be “student-centred”; our concern is that too much information will be just as unhelpful to students as too little, and there may be a need to par back on the amount of information being proposed at the course and institution level
- It should be noted that the primary information tool used by Year 12 students in NSW and the ACT, the UAC Guide, is currently in production and will be finalised by the end of May 2017 for distribution to schools in July 2017. Information in the UAC Guide will therefore use existing rather than agreed terminology, information sets and ATAR thresholds and definitions. Given the possibility of different terms and information being made available later in the year for 2018 admissions, UAC will place information in the Guide to alert prospective students to the potential changes and the availability of updated information on UAC’s website in late 2017. It should be noted that the timeline for preparation of the Guide is lengthy, and for any given year we commence discussions with our institutions in November of the previous year.
- While UAC supports the development of a streamlined process for interstate applicants, there are two issues around this that are problematic: i) the cost of those applications and how the income from applications can support UAC, and ii) the issue of institution quota management, where there will be a large increase in applications that have no realistic prospect of eventuating in an enrolment. UAC will be able to meet the proposed August 2017 timeline for agreement on an approach to facilitate interstate applications and recognises that this will entail significant development work and system implementation in 2017/18 in preparation for 2019 admissions.

On the following pages of this submission UAC provides feedback on the consultation questions outlined in Professor Krause’s letter.

UAC thanks the Implementation Working Group for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft implementation plan and looks forward to working with the Group, the Department of Education and Training and the sector to deliver on the commitments made in the HESP report.

Question 1

Is the proposed approach likely to be effective in increasing transparency and public understanding of how contemporary admissions to higher education work?

Yes, the consistency of terminology and information, and the reporting of additional information around selection processes will increase transparency. Public understanding will be improved if easy to understand terms are used and if the information is restricted to that which is necessary to students to make informed choices.

Question 2

How achievable are the proposed implementation timelines, including commitments to deliver a 'best endeavours' version of the proposed information sets to inform students applying to enter study in the 2018 academic year?

Some of the proposed timelines are not achievable given the work already done by UAC (and other admissions centres) to prepare for the 2018 admissions period. In particular, a facility to streamline interstate applications would not be available in time for the commencement of 2018 admissions. Other timelines can be met using a best endeavours approach, but it should be noted that the 2018 admissions period will be one of transition, with some information persisting in existing formats and some available using the new agreed standards. The challenge will be to minimise student confusion as we deal with this hybrid information in the short to medium term.

Question 3

If there would be difficulty in delivering the commitments proposed, what could be changed to make them achievable?

Some of the timelines for August 2017 could be pushed back to October/November 2017 without disadvantage to prospective students.

Question 4

Do you have any comments on the proposed four broad groupings to describe the basis of admission for applicants to higher education?

- a. Recent secondary education
- b. Previous higher education study
- c. Previous vocational education and training (VET) study
- d. Work and life experience

While UAC is broadly supportive of these categories, the assigning of students to only one of these groups is problematic. Our institutions often have quite complex algorithms for the selection of students who have multiple qualifications and it may be difficult to determine precisely which of these categories best fits each applicant. For example, if a student is selected in the basis of 30% of their Year 12 rank, 30% of their TAFE Diploma, 30% of their year of Bachelor level study and 10% of their employment experience, which category would that applicant fall into?

Question 5

Do you agree that the proposed approach to Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) thresholds is reasonable (i.e. replacing the use of the terms “cut-off” and “clearly in” with functional terms describing the lowest ATAR made an offer in the relevant period?).

What issues or difficulties, if any, might this raise?

In NSW and the ACT, UAC provides a cut-off for every course at the time of Main Round offers each year and in UAC's system currently uses the term “cut-off” and the only problem with that has been the incorrect use of the term “ATAR cut-off” because the cut-off is the lowest selection rank (not necessarily the same thing as the lowest ATAR). For Year 12 students, it would be helpful to know the lowest selection rank and the lowest ATAR accepted into a course. For non-Year 12 students it would be helpful to know the lowest selection rank, which may be a different number for this group of applicants, even for the same course.

Question 6

Do the proposed “information sets” meet the need identified by the Higher Education Standards Panel for comparability of the information available from different providers about the requirements to be admitted to study at each institution and each course that they deliver?

Yes, generally, but UAC is concerned with the level of detail in some cases. For example, students may not benefit from knowing ATAR percentiles. It is also important that the same headings and format are used for the sets for institutions and courses – the examples shown in Appendix D show some inconsistencies between these at the moment.

Question 7

Does the proposed approach set out in the draft implementation plan adequately inform prospective students about admission options or pathways that do not use ATAR? If not, how might this information be improved?

Yes, where it applies to Year 12 applicants. For non-Year 12 applicants there is arguably an even greater need for transparency – these students need to know their own selection ranks and the course selection ranks necessary to gain entry. At the moment, they get neither of these things.

Question 8

Any other feedback you wish to provide on the draft implementation plan and the commitments it outlines is very welcome.

UAC supports the spirit of the commitments made in the draft implementation plan and looks forward to working with the Implementation Working Group to refine some of the requirements and timelines to ensure that the information that ultimately becomes available to prospective students is fit for purpose and increases public confidence in higher education admissions. While it is important to act quickly, it is equally important to get it right the first time.