

The logo for the University Academic Council (UAC) is located in the top left corner. It consists of the letters 'UAC' in a white, bold, sans-serif font on a dark blue square background. A green diagonal line runs from the bottom left corner of the square towards the center.

UAC



NSW CURRICULUM REVIEW

Submission

November 2018

ABOUT UAC

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.

OUR SUBMISSION

UAC welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission the NSW Curriculum Review.

UAC is proud to be the bridge between secondary education and higher education for students in NSW and the ACT.

As a not-for-profit working in the broad interests of the education sector, UAC is well-placed to provide objective and neutral advice to government.

Our mission is to provide equity of access to higher education, and we value equally students and the universities they aspire to attend. We have deep engagement with schools and a strong commitment to helping them provide sound advice and support for their students, parents and broader communities.

While the scope of the Curriculum Review is very broad, our interest and expertise is in the aspect of the review considering the preparation of secondary students for the transition into tertiary education. One of the things our schooling system is meant to do is prepare students well for what they plan to do after school, including university which is our particular interest.

With that in mind, UAC considers the following areas as important for the Review to consider.

1. THE ATAR WORKS

While the ATAR is the subject of ongoing and intense criticism, and it is by no means a perfect system, it is an effective tool for the selection of students into university courses.

The ATAR is an excellent sorting and ranking mechanism. Every year in the NSW HSC there are over 27,000 different patterns of study presented. ATAR answers the question – “who did the best out of all these”?

The ATAR is highly efficient, providing ranks for over 50,000 students each year in NSW.

The ATAR is fair; it is based only on HSC results and neither advantages nor disadvantages one student over another.

2. IS THERE TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON THE ATAR?

We know that students feel intense pressure to get the highest ATAR possible and it is mis-used as a catch-all measure of 13 years of schooling.

We also know that some students, parents and teachers believe the ATAR can be gamed, and as a consequence subject choices are made that may be detrimental in the longer-term.

It is tempting to (mis)use a single number (*i.e.* the ATAR) to derive simple approaches to complex situations. We know that schools use it as a marketing tool, employers ask for evidence of it and the media finds it convenient in a headline. None of these things is what the ATAR is meant for. It was designed as a mechanism for university entry. It's not meant as an end unto itself – accessing higher education is the end in UAC's case – just as a means to an end.

It seems beyond doubt that there is too much pressure on students to get a high ATAR, and the education sector and the community as a whole need to come together to reduce that pressure.

Part of the problem is that ATAR is not explained well enough. By its very nature it is complex and that complexity makes transparency a challenge.

It is incumbent upon UAC and educators - schools and universities - to better explain the use and usefulness of the ATAR and where it sits in the broader context of student achievement and progression.

3. IF NOT THE ATAR, THEN WHAT?

Universities need to rank students so places can be awarded fairly and on merit. Universities also spend public money and have a strong interest in admitting students who can succeed at university. ATAR does these things.

The ATAR is not the only way this could be done. Already universities use a number of supplementary criteria to help them make admissions decisions. Performance in specific courses or disciplines could be used, or the ATAR could be calculated differently or broken up into a number of rankings for different fields of study.

But, if the ATAR is changed or replaced, it must be for something better and something that schools, universities, parents and students all believe and agree is better. It must also be capable of avoiding the problems that currently surround the ATAR, such as perverse choices of senior secondary subjects made by students who mistakenly believe that will lead to a higher ATAR. If not, there is a risk that the tool is changed, but the behaviour remains.

While the Curriculum Review will no doubt consider the future of the ATAR, calls to immediately abolish the ATAR are at the very least premature. The ATAR does what it is intended to do, and it will continue unless and until something comes along that works better.

4. NEED FOR EXTERNAL, COMMON EXAMINATIONS

While common external exams such as those currently used for the HSC have been the subject of some criticism, UAC believes that there will continue to be a need for external exams to rank student academic achievement in a fair and consistent way, irrespective of any change to or replacement of the ATAR.

5. NEED FOR BALANCE BETWEEN BREADTH AND DEPTH OF STUDY

We acknowledge that many in the education sector are calling for greater depth of secondary school study. However, from UAC's point of view adequate preparation for university requires more than mastery of just one or two subject areas. We believe there will be a continuing need for a comprehensive selection tool (like the ATAR or anything that may replace it) and such a tool relies on achievement across a range of studies.

6. SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT BUT SO IS CONTENT

While there may also be a need for a greater focus on developing 21st century skills in the school years, it should not be overlooked that university study presupposes a solid foundation and even mastery of subject content.

7. SENIOR YEAR CHOICES LAY THE FOUNDATION FOR UNIVERSITY SUCCESS

The choice of courses for Years 11 and 12 is critical to adequately preparing students for their future paths, and especially for tertiary study. The ATAR is being blamed for poor course choices, and all in the education sector need to redouble efforts to combat poor choices. Spreading misinformation and giving poor advice is setting students up for failure in higher education. Analysis of UAC data (over 100,000 records) shows that students who follow a pattern of study while at school that prepares them well for further study after school have higher GPAs and lower attrition rates than those who do not. UAC is currently developing analytic tools for students to better inform these choices and ultimately lead to better outcomes in higher education.

So important is prudent course choice that universities may also need to be more prescriptive in terms of their requirements for entry to specific courses – that is, introduce hard prerequisites rather than the softer adjustments currently used. This would be more successful in driving student behaviour towards a pattern of study that will prepare them well and avoid them perceiving their choice of courses as a tool to maximise their ATAR.

8. IMPACT OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY ON SECONDARY EDUCATION

While the demand-driven system currently operating in higher education may have cast doubt on the necessity for a ranking tool for university entry, some courses and even some universities still need to ration places and government policy regarding funding of university places is subject to change. It's important for the review to consider education as a continuum, and how changes made to the secondary system, and Years 11 and 12 in particular, may have knock-on effects for entry into post-school education.

9. NATIONAL CONSISTENCY IN UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS

The Review should take account of the trend towards a national approach to university admission. When Queensland adopts the ATAR in 2020 all Australian states and territories will be using the ATAR as the primary basis of admission for Year 12 students.

In addition, in the last two years there has been a concerted push for greater national consistency in admissions information and processes. As part of that the Australian Government recently launched the Course Seeker website containing consistently presented course information for all universities across Australia.

Clearly, any plans for change in NSW would need to carefully consider the potential impacts on the national framework.

UAC thanks NESAs for the opportunity to provide this submission to the NSW Curriculum Review and looks forward to continued work with Government, the education sector and the broader community to deliver greater success in tertiary education.