



REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK (RUN) SUBMISSION ON THE DRAFT ADMISSIONS TRANSPARENCY PLAN

Headline messages

The RUN group strongly endorses the principles of greater transparency of higher education admissions and better understanding among prospective students and their families of how admissions work.

That said, we consider that coming to a shared understandings and agreements on terminology and meanings – and particularly making changes to systems, as well as to policies and procedures – is more complex than the draft plan assumes. These changes are complex and require time as well as the collation of human and other resources.

It may be that aspects of the plan may need to be iterative as specific issues and challenges come to light as part of implementation.

In light of the detail contained on pages 18 and 19 of the draft Admissions Transparency Implementation plan, and specifically our understanding that there will be a staged approach to implementation of changes related to providing greater clarity around information on ATAR admissions, we consider that the proposed changes in relation to ATAR are possible this year. Compared to other bases for admission, the ATAR admissions path is relatively straightforward and is managed largely by TACs who have the capacity to assist in widespread consistent changes.

One of our major concerns is the focus on the ATAR as the 'norm' and the positioning of other admissions as 'alternative'. As the Higher Education Standards Panel pointed out in their original paper advising the Minister on admissions transparency, people admitted to university on the basis of secondary education with an ATAR make up only 31 percent of admissions in Australia. Further, they state:

In essence, the ATAR was devised as a rationing device to allocate places in courses with limited numbers of places. With the lifting of caps on places in most courses, this rationing imperative no longer applies in the same way. (p.3).

We would be pleased to see a refocusing on the non-ATAR admissions, which make up the large majority of admissions in Australia.

In terms of the 69 percent of admissions that are not based on ATAR, we are concerned that there appears to be a desire to categorise students in a particular admissions basis when the reality of admissions is more complex. For example, a student who is admitted on the basis of partial VET qualification plus significant relevant work experience could be recorded as having entered on the basis of one, or the other, or both. How will we ensure that information recorded here is accurate and adequately represents the complexity of admissions, which are often made on a combination of factors? One suggestion is to use the term 'student *primarily* on the basis of X' which lessens although does not remove the risk of misinformation.

We are concerned about the current order of the profile data and therefore the apparent hierarchy of basis of admission which seem to place an emphasis on ATAR entry. Consideration could be given to listing the basis of admission in a logical manner that reflects admissions most relevant to higher education first – that is, admission on the basis of previous higher education studies should appear first in the table; then admission on VET studies; then admission from secondary education pathways; then admission on work and life experience.

For each category, we understand that numbers and percent of students previously admitted would give some indication of future admissions practice. However, there is a risk that the relative size of previous entry cohorts (particularly if numbers are small) could be misinterpreted by prospective applicants who might deduce that if they fall into a particular category they would be unlikely to gain entry. One suggestion is to simply include a green tick box indicator against each entry method under which applicants have been most recently admitted before the data columns. This would be helpful for prospective students, careers and advisors and family. The more detailed information around percentages could be kept for government reporting and sector analysis purposes.

While we are strongly in favour of increased transparency around university admissions, we are concerned that the current proposals for large volumes of detailed information will hinder rather than assist understanding. Specifically, we do not support the proposal to include detailed financial or student services information as part of admissions transparency. We believe it may create 'clutter' from the prospective students points of view when considering applying to a university and it would be better if this particular detailed information was provided elsewhere.

We would recommend the Admissions Transparency Implementation Working Group (IWG) liaise with relevant professional associations and regulatory bodies to determine whether their accreditation and/or registration requirements would be in conflict with anything being recommended as part of the Admissions Transparency plan.

Some points relevant to the specific questions are given below:

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

- The principle about improving transparency is admirable and will be positive. It may not be straightforward to change relevant terminology.
- It's too early to say whether it will be effective or not. This will depend, in part, on the audience – perhaps it is more likely to be useful for careers advisors than prospective students?
- Getting consistency in nomenclature will be challenging. Getting consistency and the meanings of terms (and related changes to systems, policy and procedures) will be more complex. Decisions may have to be made during implementation about where it might be more difficult to 'harmonise' terminology and perhaps stage an approach.
- Question: Will private higher education providers be included and, if so, will they have to adhere to the plan? If so, one challenge might be private providers needing to conform to university terminology that can't be changed.
- Questions about what social services are offered may lead to an enormous amount of information and a lot of 'clutter' potentially of little benefit to students. If an institution has adhered to the required Higher Education Standards, you would have to assume that these services are available. It could be argued that it just adds red tape with no additional value including them as part of the plan.

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

- While we are confident that our publicly available admissions information is already very transparent, there is concern amongst some of our members about meeting the timelines for higher education providers to have information published in the required format by August 2017, particularly the requirement to use agreed common terminology. Publications for the 2018 academic year will be completed well before that date. If the process is rushed, it will only result in greater confusion for prospective students.
- It will take considerable time and resources to complete the necessary information sets in the timeframe. Potentially, a smaller subset of information might be provided for each course (which might not have the nationally agreed common terminology) by the proposed date.

- 3. If there would be difficulty in delivering the commitments proposed, what could be changed to make them achievable?**
 - Like the TAC in Queensland has offered to do, all TACs could offer to broker for universities around data and terminology harmonisation.

- 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**
 - Does this refer to how applicants are considered or how universities should report (or is it both)?
 - Some students use multiple categories as basis for admission – students don't always fall into one and only one – so transparency and reporting against each individual category outlined above will be difficult

- 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?**
 - RUN universities have a very diverse population with a wide range of backgrounds – the basis of all admissions should be made equally transparent.
 - The ATAR should not be positioned as the ‘norm’, and the myriad of other entry methods should not be positioned as ‘alternative’, as it is not representative of entry criteria across the sector.
 - Blurriness is around the published level versus what actually happens in practice – there is need for clarity and transparency around the spread of ATARs.
 - Language should be clear and meaningful.

- 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?**
 - Agree with the proposal to have greater transparency around the awarding of bonus points.
 - Data differences across the system need to be resolved.

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?

- The proposed approach should provide clearer information – whether or not it improves understanding needs to be tested.

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On behalf of the RUN DVC/PVC Teaching and Learning Group