

The UAC logo is a dark blue square with a green diagonal stripe from the bottom-left to the top-right. The letters 'UAC' are written in white, bold, sans-serif font in the upper left corner of the square.

**UAC**



# Higher Education Standards Panel

Response to Discussion paper  
Developments in higher education admissions practices

April 2023

## Introduction

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 valuable 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 public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

In recent years UAC has developed a credit management system and a suite of products and services using verifiable credentials technology. We have been very proud to work with the Australian Government to establish the Course Seeker website, the National Credentials Platform and the microcredentials marketplace MicroCred Seeker.

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.

UAC is therefore pleased to provide the following response to the Higher Education Standards Panel's Discussion Paper Developments in higher education admissions practices.

## UAC responses to questions

### 1. What outcomes, characteristic of an effective system for the transition into higher education, can be used to assess the impact of changing admission practices?

Whatever form admission takes, the goal is to place the right students in the right courses and set them up for success.

Measures of retention and performance at university for students admitted through different pathways can therefore be used to determine whether there are differences between cohorts based on their mode of admission.

### 2. What are the external factors and provider intentions driving changes in domestic undergraduate admission practices?

There is a clear demand in the community for a more holistic assessment of Year 12 students that lessens the focus on ATAR as a single measure. This is in response to concerns about student mental health and/or the unintended negative impacts on the provision of a broad-based secondary education.

Providers are also seeking to expand the range of pathways into higher education, especially in the context of admission of under-represented groups.

COVID-19 necessarily led to consideration of alternative methods of admission for Year 12 students; in NSW and the ACT this was specifically in the form of an increase in at-school offers.

In the medium to longer term, lifelong learning and the growth in recognition of microcredentials will have a significant impact on admission practices.

### **3. What are the impact and implications of At-school offers? Are there ways to mitigate concerns?**

Much of the public commentary regarding at-school offers is informed by anecdote rather than data. Teachers who see a noticeable decline in engagement and performance from their students once they have received an offer are understandably frustrated and worried about the longer-term impact on those students. Administrators responsible for senior secondary schooling are concerned about downstream effects on the Year 12 qualification. Parents are confused by the plethora of options and processes.

If we look to data to provide evidence of or to refute these concerns, the picture is somewhat incomplete.

The growth of at-school offers in NSW and the ACT has occurred primarily in recent years, with a notable surge in 2020-2021. Consequently, some of the data (eg graduation rates) that would enable analysis of the impact of these offers has not yet become available. Other research, focusing more on the motivational impacts on students, is still in train.

Informal research conducted by UAC found that 67% of students who had received an early offer felt less stressed because of it; 60% said it helped them to do their best in the exams; and 77% said it improved their sense of achievement in Year 12.

Of course, irrespective of whether the concerns around early offers are perceived or real, there are ways to mitigate them.

The recent statement of the NSWVCC on early offer principles provides an instructive example. Making at-school offers conditional upon completion of the HSC and delaying their release goes a considerable way towards removing any temptation for students to disengage from their studies.

### **4. In what systemic ways are higher education providers improving the admission experience for applicants:**

- who are secondary school students?**
- with previous higher education experience?**
- with VET qualifications?**
- relying on post-school, work and life experiences?**

For secondary school students the admission experience is enhanced by at-school offers through the provision of an expanded range of pathways into university. Where this involves engaging with them earlier there may be the additional benefit of reducing the pressure of the final months of school. Where this involves the consideration of criteria relevant to specific courses there may be the additional benefit of improving the chances of university success. Where this involves a more holistic consideration of student potential for success, there may be the additional benefit of opening the door a little wider for students from under-represented groups.

For students with previous higher education experience and/or VET qualifications, the admission experience could be significantly improved by efficient and transparent credit arrangements. UAC has expanded its services into this area, with much interest from providers in participating in a credit platform. However, this initiative is at a relatively early stage with respect to its adoption, and as such is an area of considerable inconsistency across the broader Australian higher education sector. Unsurprisingly, this inconsistency translates to a degree of frustration for students.

For those relying on post-school, work and life experiences to gain credit recognition, considerable work still needs to be done to address significant information deficits, which are exacerbated by lack of transparency and consistency across the sector.

For all students, the introduction of general capabilities assessment and the adoption of digital credentials technology will in future allow for a more holistic and seamless admission experience, not just at specific entry points but throughout the lifelong learning journey.

## **5. Are there elements of developing admission practices that risk further disadvantage to applicants from underrepresented groups?**

Considering at-school offers, the main vulnerabilities in terms of equity are the resources required, for both schools and students. The fragmentation of applications that has occurred as a result of the growth in direct applications has significant implications for students and the schools supporting them. For all the benefits of at-school offers, some schools simply don't have the resources to assist students in navigating the plethora of pathways available to them.

Considering other admission practices such as the use of broader criteria and learner profiles, the question that must be addressed is whether all students have the same chance to meet those criteria. In the case of extra-curricular activities, for example this may not be the case, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds not having the same degree of access to such activities.

If students from underrepresented groups are to be on an equal footing with those from less disadvantaged backgrounds, adoption of a broader range of capabilities against which to assess the likelihood of success must include criteria that are available to all (or at least as many as possible).

As an example, a carer might have developed capabilities that are related to resilience, which in turn has a positive impact on their likelihood of success in higher education. Such capabilities are not typically and explicitly considered when applying for further study. Development of frameworks to account for such capabilities would lead to greater access and participation by underrepresented groups.

## **6. What other undergraduate admission practices in countries around the world could be of value in Australia?**

There is a very broad spectrum of admissions practices globally, from bespoke direct admissions provided by for-profit service organisations through to highly centralised processes run by governments and their agencies. The Australian HE sector strikes a balance and is positioned somewhere near the centre of this spectrum.

UAC has an excellent understanding of how various admissions practices work around the globe. For the purposes of this review, we feel that the most important question is: what practices are most appropriate for the Australian context?

## **7. What are the major areas for improvement in the national HE information websites?**

As an example, the Course Seeker website could be improved by the addition of pathways data information, including at-school offers.

UAC would be happy to again work with the Government and the other TACs to deliver this and other identified improvements to Course Seeker.

## **8. How can Tertiary Admission Centres best support developments in admission practices?**

Given that developments in admission practices are not occurring uniformly across Australia, each TAC is well positioned to support and facilitate local and even individual approaches and best meet the needs of its specific stakeholders.

At the national level, ACTAC could:

- develop common data sharing protocols to improve the transparency of admission practices across the country
- build on earlier work together to develop a more streamlined approach to applications from interstate students.