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23 May 2016

Professor Peter Shergold

Chair, Higher Education Standards Panel

c/- Higher Education Standards Panel Secretariat

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Dear Professor Shergold,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Higher Education Standards Panel consultation paper on transparency of higher education admissions processes released in April 2016.

The University of Sydney has been closely involved with the preparation of the Go8 submission to this consultation process, and I write on behalf of the University to endorse the Go8 position and response. In particular, we support the Go8 Transparency Statement as a framework for defining transparency in admissions and we fully endorse the Go8's recommendations to the Panel.

The University of Sydney supports the ten principles identified in the consultation paper that should underpin transparency in admissions policies and practices. We believe that the discussion around admissions transparency is timely and that universities will need to demonstrate accountability around admissions to an increasingly interested and knowledgeable public.

In relation to alternative pathways for admissions, we suggest a similar level of transparency with openness around cohort data on student progression and outcomes that support alternative pathways, as well as the evidence and principles underpinning such approaches.

Similarly, for courses with specific academic pre-requisites for admission, disaggregated performance data of past cohorts could be made more readily available to prospective students, to enable them to assess their likelihood for success in their chosen fields prior to enrolment.

The Admissions Committee of the University of Sydney's Academic Board has considered and discussed the consultation paper in detail, with the full Board endorsing the **attached** submission provided by its Chair, Professor Tony Masters, at its May meeting. The University of Sydney endorses the detailed comments provided by the Board, which we view as complementary to the higher level suggestions made by the Go8.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment and the University of Sydney very much looks forward to the outcomes of the discussion the HESP is leading.

Yours sincerely,

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Professor Pip Pattison

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education)

**Associate Professor Tony Masters**  
Chair, Academic Board

23 May 2016

Professor Peter Shergold  
Chair, Higher Education Standards Panel

By email: [HigherEd@education.gov.au](mailto:HigherEd@education.gov.au)

Dear Professor Shergold

The University of Sydney Academic Board welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Higher Education Standards Panel's Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes. This submission has been prepared based on advice from the Board's [Admissions Committee](#), endorsed by the Board at its 18 May 2016 meeting.

The Board has always had a commitment to ensuring that the University of Sydney's admissions decisions are made on the basis of merit. We have good evidence that the ATAR remains one of the best indicators of academic success in the University of Sydney degrees. The Board also recognise that many students who have experienced disadvantage have the potential for academic success, and despite not making a set standard for admission, deserve the opportunity for admission. We believe in the University making evidence based allowances in such cases, with these allowances made by offering specific entry pathways that are well publicised and transparent.

It is important for students to make informed choices about their tertiary education options, and the current system provides less than full information about ATAR cut-offs and alternative entry schemes. The Board is open to the University of Sydney providing more data on ATAR cut offs, median ATARs and types and number of offers made above and below the ATAR cut off to increase transparency and better inform future students and the community as a whole.

### ***Comment on the HESP's proposed principles***

The University of Sydney's Academic Board agrees with the principles stated in the paper, but wishes to comment specifically on Principle 3: "The broad autonomy of institutions over their admissions policies should be accepted, providing that these policies are compliant with the Higher Education Standards."

In recent years, both professional accrediting bodies and some government bodies have sought to impose specific entrance standards on some degrees that lead to qualifying in specific professions. We believe that accrediting bodies and governments should focus on the learning outcomes and competencies of students at the end of the degree, rather than the student qualities at commencement. If an institution can improve what might be perceived to be weaknesses in a student at entry and ensure learning outcomes and skills at the end of the degree, then there is less need for externally enforced entry standards.

While we must ensure our learning outcomes at the end of a degree meet at least the minimum standards specified by local accrediting bodies, we must be mindful that not all students (especially international students) are taking a degree for the purposes of entering the Australian workforce in that profession. It is debatable if we should be potentially excluding them based on externally imposed local entry criteria, if we can ensure they meet the standards on graduation.

## Response to Consultation Questions

*1. Based on your experience, what is the most important information needed to help potential higher education students determine which course to study and which institution to apply for? Please feel free to rank the different types of information in order of importance.*

• *Examples could include information about course prerequisites, ATAR cut-offs, other non ATAR-related entry options or requirements, possible career pathways and qualification requirements, institution reputation, campus facilities, course cost, student peer cohort characteristics, family history or other connections to a particular institution, accreditation of a course by a professional body or association, graduate employment and earnings outcomes, student reviews or surveys of teaching quality, recommendations from friends or family.*

We believe all the above reasons influence different students to different extents. A combination of career pathway, institutional reputation and ATAR cut-off are probably the more prevalent factors.

The geographical location and transport options to the institution are also a key factor. Availability of affordable, safe and reasonably close accommodation options is often a barrier to applicants considering institutions not close to their home.

*2. Is knowledge about how the ATAR rankings are calculated and published 'cut-off' thresholds a significant influencing factor on course and institution preferences? How could this information be made more accessible and useful?*

There is sometimes a misconception that the ATAR cut-off for a course is a direct measure of the level of difficulty of the course. The ATAR cut-off is usually a combination of demand and academic difficulty, but more often than not the ATAR cut-off is used to control the number of students admitted to each degree. Courses are obliged to set a "minimum eligibility score" (MES), which is the lowest rank we perceive a student could have and still have a reasonable chance of success in the course. For the majority of our courses the MES is notably below the cut-off. We use the MES when considering applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Degrees with small entry cohorts or with many alternative entry schemes can have their published ATAR cut-offs significantly skewed (e.g. a course where only 2 applicants with an ATAR of 99 are made offers via the main round, even though the institution has made 50 offers to students below the cut off in the early rounds) can send incorrect messages to students about cut-offs.

*3. Is there sufficient information about how 'bonus points' are awarded and used to adjust 'raw' ATARs sufficiently understood? Should the application of bonus points be more consistent across different institutions? Is the current variety of different bonus point rules appropriate to meet the needs of individual students and institutions?*

We prefer to avoid the use of the term 'bonus points' and artificially changing a student's ranking, and would rather consider using differing cut-offs against the original ATAR. While this may seem a nuanced distinction, we consider it important to retain the integrity and intent of the ATAR's calculation.

There is general confusion from prospective students, parents and others regarding the role of "bonus points" in ATAR cut-offs. It is not clear that for example an ATAR cut-off of

85 may mean that students with ATARS of 80, 81 etc. were made offers as a result of the addition of bonus points to their ATAR. Hence for those institutions operating bonus points schemes the published ATAR cut-off is never the ATAR of the last student made an offer. We suggest to improve transparency that bonus points are abandoned by all institutions and the “real” ATAR cut-off is published.

Notwithstanding that, adjustments to a score or cut-off ought to be evidence based, and we acknowledge that since different institutions have different approaches and styles, that any possible adjustments could be institutionally different. However, such variety is confusing for students when navigating the admissions process. We believe there is scope for consolidation of subject bonus points within a given institution, in broad groups of courses (e.g. STEM, health, humanities, business) to reduce the number of options a student must consider.

We are not in favour of extremely broad bonus points where effectively almost every applicant for a degree is likely to be eligible for those points – as this unnecessarily and artificially can be used as a method of inflating the published cut-off.

*4. Is there sufficient knowledge of the range of alternative admissions procedures employed by higher education institutions?*

• Examples could include ‘early’ offers on the basis of previous year’s cut-off or school recommendations.

We are satisfied that individual institutions and admissions centres do reasonably promote and publish the variety of different admission pathways, but we acknowledge that not all students in some disadvantaged cohorts may be aware of all the pathways that are available to them. A combination of information from the tertiary institutions, high schools and social support agencies (e.g. Centrelink) to continue to advise the general community of the variety of schemes is required.

*5. Should there be an annual report of the proportion of students accepted into courses by each higher education institution on the basis of their ATARs and/or what the median ATARs was for each course?*

Yes. We firmly believe that greater transparency in admissions would better inform the community and potential students, on the proviso that for small courses any such information did not compromise individual privacy. We would tentatively suggest that a combination of minimum and maximum ATARs, plus medians and quartiles of distributions, would be an appropriately detailed level of reporting.

*6. Do the current state-based Tertiary Admissions Centre arrangements adequately cope with students’ desire for mobility to institutions across state borders? Would a more national approach to managing applications across borders be beneficial?*

There is reasonable transparency and mobility in interstate movements. Queensland uses a slightly different system of the OP versus the ATAR in all other states. While there is reasonably well advertised conversions between OP and ATAR, there would be benefits to a common measure.

With regards to cut-offs, there is a variety of methods used between states. Most NSW institutions publish a single cut off, whereas other states (such as Victoria) have recently moved to more detailed numbers such as the “clearly-in” cut-off. We believe there is benefit in providing surety of an offer to students where possible, and several NSW institutions (such as the University of Sydney) have taken to guaranteeing the cut-off for selected courses in advance. We see the benefit of extending this process as widely as possible, except where strict caps on numbers for quality purposes exist.

*7. Is there an understanding of how such mechanisms as early offers, second round offers and forced offers affect the transparency of higher education entry? How, if at all, should these factors be dealt with for the purposes of transparency?*

Both institutions and admissions centres do have published information on these processes. However, the processes are complicated, and we acknowledge that often only a small number of dedicated admissions staff know the full details; and consequently high school students and the high school careers advisors and university academics who often advise them, may make incorrect decisions based on not knowing the full facts. The offer process can be complex, but we support simplification and the provision of information where possible.

*8. What information or enhancements do you think should be added to the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website?*

No comment.

*9. How best should comparable information on student admissions procedures be made available to the public? What is the most appropriate and effective way to communicate information to students? What information or enhancements do you think should be added to Tertiary Admission Centre websites, university and non-university institution websites, and/or Australian Government websites such as QILT and Study Assist?*

No comment.

*10. What special measures are needed to ensure equity of access for disadvantaged students?*

We are satisfied that academic allowances exist to permit disadvantaged students to gain entry – such as specific institutional programs (The University of Sydney has programs such as E12, Cadigal and Broadway). The more significant challenge are other barriers that such students have that impact on success while they are studying – which include the perception of high fees (even if deferred via HELP), accommodation and other living costs, and access to a social support network.

*11. Can you suggest any other changes that would improve public awareness and understanding of tertiary admissions processes?*

We believe it is important to dispel the sometime felt community pressure on students to “use their ATAR”, and if a student received an ATAR of 99, then they should choose a course with an ATAR of 99. Anything less is deemed “wasting their potential”. Overall student performance would be improved if more emphasis was placed on choosing a course for which a student has desire or passion. Possibly changing the way cut-offs are published and marketed, placing more emphasis on degree outcomes, and debunking the myth that ATAR cut-offs are solely related to academic rigour, could improve the situation.

The key misconception in the admissions process is that ATAR cut-offs are primarily related to the perceived academic rigour of the course, whereas in reality the more significant factor is supply and demand. Unfortunately, this misconception is too often reinforced by commentary published in the mainstream media. The challenge is to ensure that tertiary and secondary institutions consistently explain the process to the community, and via this the media is challenged to focus on the facts. The recent

statistics released by the Sydney Morning Herald have had the beneficial effect of highlighting to the public that alternate pathways exist.

*Other issues*

The theme of the questions being asked have a natural and understandable focus on the admission process for local undergraduate students, who recently completed the HSC. There are several other key cohorts in the admission process

- **Local students not directly from school (more commonly referred to as NRSL – non recent school leavers).** Commonly such students gain entry on the basis of scores in another tertiary attempt – possibly another degree, TAFE, or a university preparation course. There is much less transparency in the admissions process for these students. The conversion schedules used by admission centres to convert other scores to equivalent ATARs are usually not published, and are very complex. Different institutions then use different algorithms to determine a score based on average of recent attempts, the best attempt, and so on. Common advice given to students who miss out on their course immediately after high school is to do another course, go well, and reapply based on those results. However it is difficult for them to obtain clear guidance on the type of score they will require if they take this option. Improved clarity in the standards applied to NRSL would help those initial school leavers who miss their preferred choice.
- **International students (undergraduate).** Universities and admission centres use conversion tables to convert international high school scores to ATAR equivalents. The additional selection criterion involves English language proficiency, usually via an IELTS score or similar. IELTS or equivalent is not a perfect predictor of language ability in the same way ATAR is not a perfect predictor. Our challenge as a tertiary sector is to evaluate how such English measures can be improved, and how we can ensure students from NESB improve their English skills while studying.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission from the University of Sydney's Academic Board.

Yours sincerely,

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Tony Masters